

2018

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Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 4 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Benton and Franklin counties

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DISTRICT 4 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 4 is located in the south central part of the state, in the Columbia Basin (Figure 1). The district is comprised of Benton and Franklin counties and administratively is part of WDFW's South-Central Region 3. The following game management units (GMUs) are included in District 4: 372 (Rattlesnake Hills), 373 (Horse Heaven), 379 (Ringold), and 381 (Kahlotus).

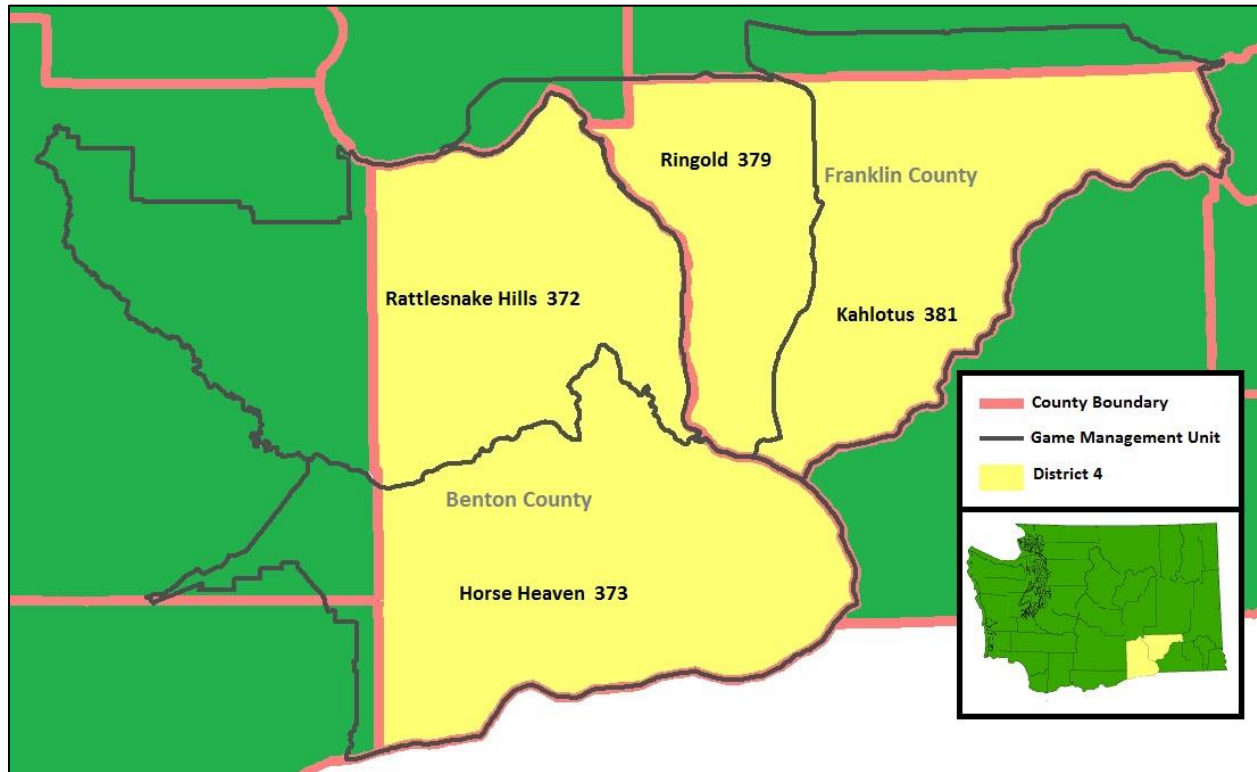


Figure 1. Location of District 4 in Washington and associated counties and game management units.

Several of Washington's major rivers are prominent in this district. The Hanford Reach of the Columbia River runs between Benton and Franklin counties. This 50-mile stretch is one of the most scenic areas of the Columbia in Washington. The Snake and Palouse rivers define the eastern boundary of Franklin County. Near the heart of District 4 is the confluence of the Yakima, Snake, and Walla Walla rivers, with the main stem of the Columbia River at Tri-Cities (Pasco, Kennewick, and Richland). Large populations of waterfowl congregate throughout the district for breeding, migrating, and wintering, despite the fact that this is the driest part of Washington, with only six to nine inches of precipitation per year. Riparian vegetation provides habitat and cover for game birds and the breaks along the Snake and Palouse rivers are favored by congregations of wintering mule deer.

Upland habitats are part of the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion, historically dominated by native shrubsteppe. Since the 1800s, farmers and ranchers have been working the land around District 4. Intensive irrigated agriculture supporting many crops, orchards, and vineyards is a major land

use in the Yakima River Valley, southern Benton County, and western Franklin County. Dryland wheat is dominant in central Benton County and eastern Franklin County. Many thousands of acres of this wheat country have been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Program (SAFE), providing cover for mule deer and other wildlife that have lost much of their natural shrubsteppe habitat. Fires are currently the largest threat to remaining habitat patches, and are frequently human caused. Invasive cheat grass has created a flammable carpet through the shrubsteppe, resulting in large and fast fires. Sagebrush takes decades to return post-fire, so please be careful and fire-wise.

In Benton County, large east-west trending ridges, including the Horse Heaven Hills and Rattlesnake Hills, add to the topographic diversity of the district. The eastern Franklin County landscape includes the rolling hills of the Palouse Prairie and the southernmost extent of the channeled scablands. Western Franklin County contains several small lakes and depression wetlands that provide additional wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

Hunting access in District 4 is more limited than some other parts of the state, as much of the district is held in private ownership or by federal agencies that do not allow hunting. However, quality opportunities do exist, and WDFW is always trying to expand hunting access. Information and related links to several public sites listed in each game section can be found in the Major Public Lands section. Information on how to access private land through one of WDFW's access programs is available in the Private Lands section and on the [WDFW website](#).

Overall, the landscape of District 4 provides a diversity of habitats favored by waterfowl, upland birds (including chukar, partridge, pheasant, quail, and dove), and big game (including deer and elk). Welcome to District 4 and happy hunting!

ELK

Opportunities for elk hunting in District 4 are primarily limited to lands surrounding the Hanford Reach National Monument in Rattlesnake Hills GMU 372, which contains Blackrock Elk Area 3722 and Corral Canyon Elk Area 3721. Surveys on the Hanford Monument in January 2017 yielded a total herd estimate of 1,070 elk (Figure 2). This herd is above the population objective, but harvest remains challenging as the herd seeks refuge on the federal Hanford lands in daylight hours during hunting season.

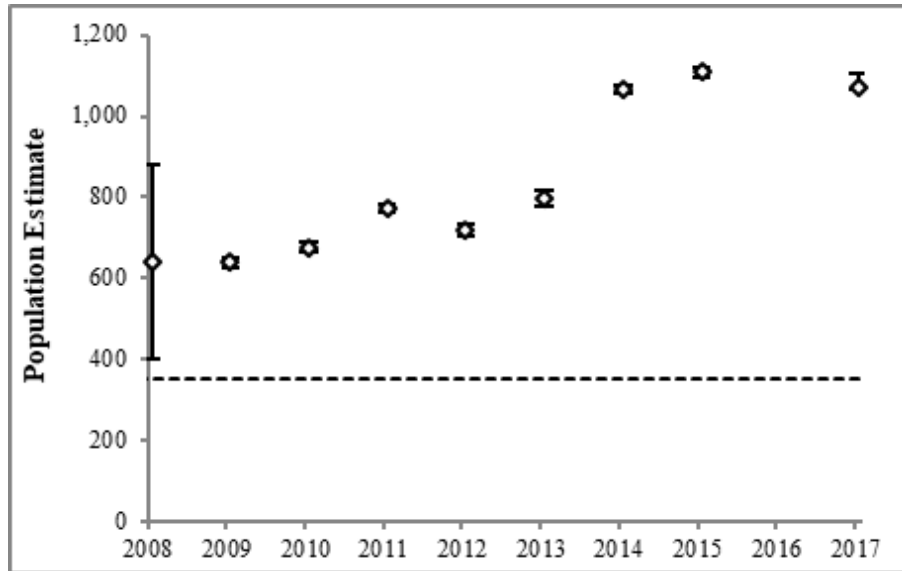


Figure 2. Winter population estimates of Hanford elk herd over time.

Typically, during general hunting seasons, 170-190 hunters pursue elk in District 4. Of those, 20-30 are successful. Last year, 171 hunters reported a harvest of 26 elk during general seasons, for a success rate of 15 percent, which is above the statewide average. Harvest success usually depends upon private land access, forage conditions on the Hanford site, and the availability of forage crops on farm lands outside of the protected area. Hunters are usually more successful early in the season. While most of the land around the Hanford Monument is private, elk hunters can pursue elk in Benton County on WDFW’s Thornton and Rattlesnake Slope units of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area north of Prosser and Benton City.

The Blackrock Ranches and Silver Dollar special permit hunts offer a chance to hunt Hanford elk on private land. If selected, permit holders are guaranteed a one-day guided hunt. There are several permits for youth and hunters with disabilities, plus a Quality Elk permit and Antlerless Permit open to any hunter. See the current [hunting regulations](#) for more information.

In other parts of District 4, a small number of elk occur sporadically with a handful or less harvested annually in the Ringold or Kahlotus units. In these GMUs, the [Juniper Dunes Wilderness](#) and the [Windmill Ranch Unit](#) of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area may offer opportunities for elk hunting on public land. A small herd also roams lands in Franklin County between Kahlotus and the Palouse River.

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU or permit hunt are [online](#).



Image 1. Youth hunter with elk harvested in GMU 372.

DEER

District 4 primarily offers mule deer hunting opportunities. White-tailed deer seasons exist to allow hunters to harvest any white-tailed deer if encountered, but this species is relatively uncommon in the district, making up less than one percent of deer on surveys.

In 2017, the hunter success rate during the general seasons for deer in District 4 was 26 percent, compared to the five-year average of 31 percent. Statewide average hunter success was 23.6 percent. District 4 hunters generally enjoy a high success rate primarily due to restricted private land access for hunters and a lack of cover for deer.

Eastern Franklin County (Kahlotus - GMU 381) is an important wintering area for mule deer that migrate to the relatively mild winter conditions near the Snake River. While a small resident population exists, most mule deer migrate in from northern units starting in October. During mild winters, some of these deer remain further north or delay moving into the district. The late general muzzleloader season in Franklin County (GMUs 379 and 381) usually provides a good opportunity to find mule deer in November.

****There are some changes in 2018 affecting deer hunts in the Kahlotus Unit. Hunters should notice several “Washtucna” hunts in the pamphlet that include GMU 381-Kahlotus along with three adjacent GMUs (Figure 3). These replace many of the Kahlotus hunts offered in the past.**

Also, the late muzzleloader general season only allows harvest of bucks 3 point or better, and no longer includes antlerless mule deer. These changes reflect efforts to manage these deer as a population, and hope to give hunters flexibility to hunt in units where the migratory deer are during the time of the season. It should help reduce heavy pressure on some sections of the wintering grounds and provide harvest that is more consistent across the GMUs that share this population. Washtucna permits include late muzzleloader antlerless, modern antlerless tags plus youth, disabled, and senior permits. The number of these permits are reviewed annually.

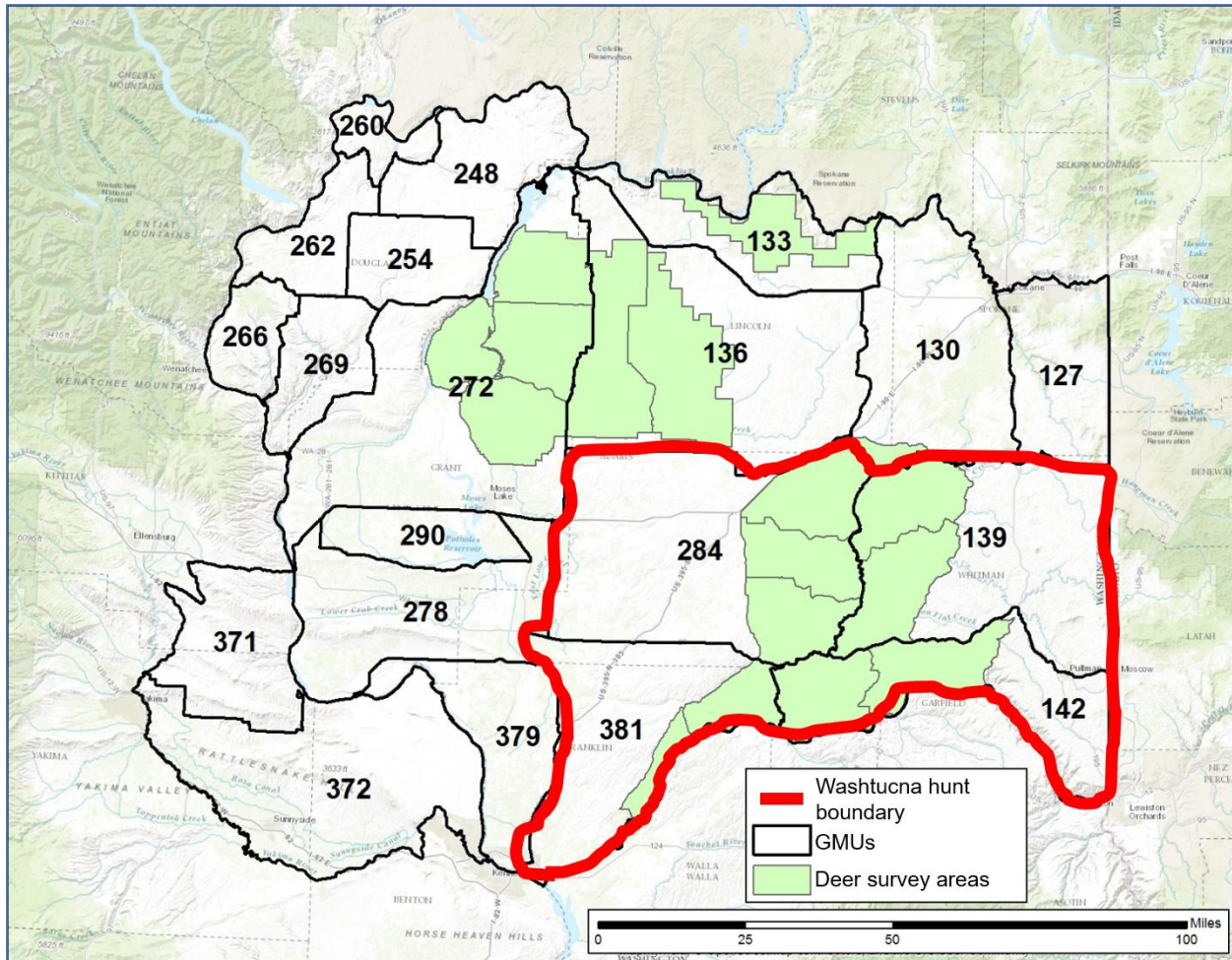


Figure 3. Boundary map of the new Washtucna Hunt area encompassing four GMUs.

Post-hunt surveys in December 2017 yielded an estimated 21 bucks to 100 does in GMU 381 (Figure 4), which is within the goal for the population. This includes non-legal bucks (spike and 2 point). High hunter success and low buck escapement in the open country where this population lives can contribute to challenges locating legal bucks. Fawn numbers were at 69 fawns per 100 does (Figure 4), above the 10-year average of 60 fawns per 100 does.

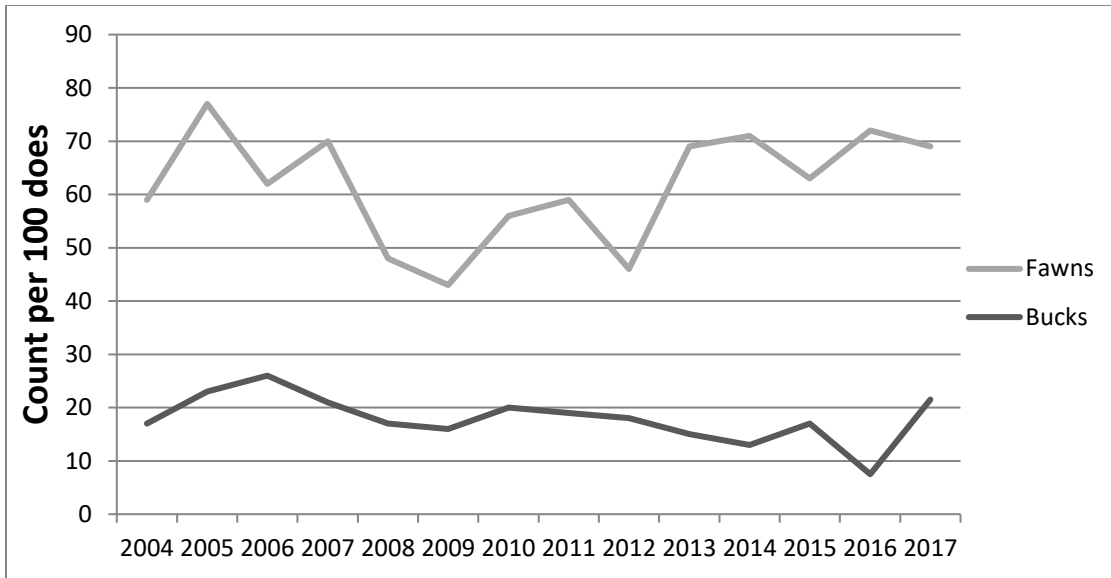


Figure 4. Buck and fawn ratios per 100 does in District 4 based on post-hunt road surveys.



Image 2. A buck harvested in Franklin County in GMU 381.

In northern Benton County (Rattlesnake Hills - GMU 372), spend some time scouting for deer in the Thornton and Rattlesnake units of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (Figure 12). There is also some Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) parcels. Be sure to know what land you are on and avoid trespassing onto private property, including when navigating property corners and retrieving game.

In southern Benton County (Horse Heaven Hills - GMU 373), there are small groups of deer available to hunters on BLM land in the Horse Heaven Hills, scattered tracts of DNR, and private property in WDFW access programs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Deer Areas 3071 (Whitcomb) and 3072 (Paterson) units provide 80 special permits required to harvest deer on the NWR, including two archery periods in October and three muzzleloader hunts from November into December. Youth, buck, and antlerless permits are available on both units. Please consult the current hunting regulations for more details. Deer Area 3372 - Sunnyside (Benton and Yakima counties) was created in 2016 to provide additional general season opportunities along the Yakima River from Prosser to Union Gap.

There are many properties where hunters can gain access to deer through one of WDFW’s private land access programs. Preseason scouting is advisable in order to learn where to hunt and obtain permission from private landowners. WDFW’s [GoHunt](#) map website is the place to learn where private lands access areas are located. You can also check the [Private Lands Access](#) page. Access properties frequently change from year to year and sometimes even within a season. It is advised to double check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public.

UPLAND BIRD

Benton and Franklin counties offer upland bird hunters many opportunities. Habitat and weather are the key components influencing the survival and reproduction of birds. At the WDFW Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area, funding has been awarded for enhancing nesting opportunities for several species, including pheasant, quail, and doves.

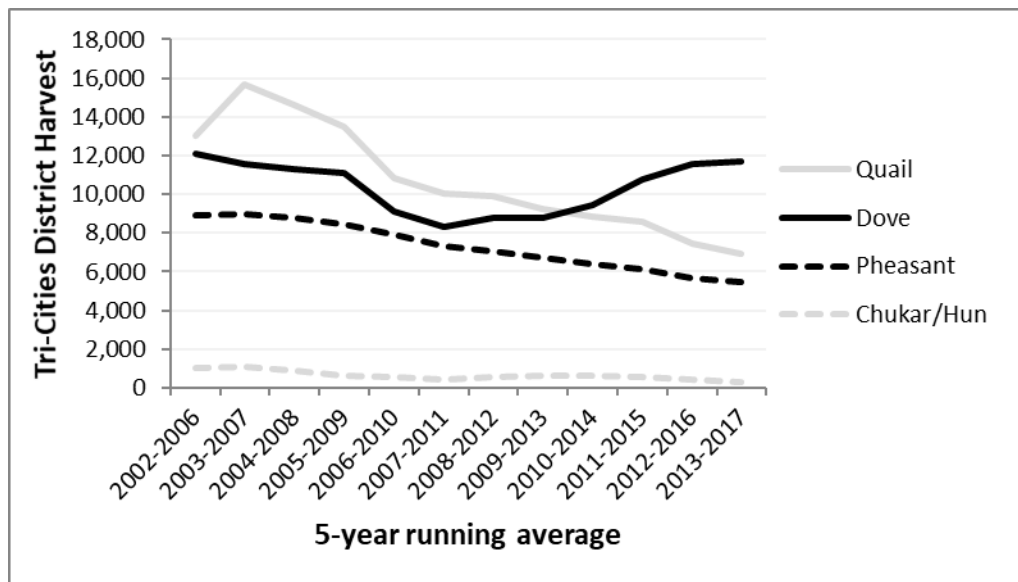


Figure 5. District 4 upland bird harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

PHEASANT

In 2017, ring-necked pheasant hunters and harvest in District 4 increased by 17 percent and 18 percent, respectively (Figure 6).

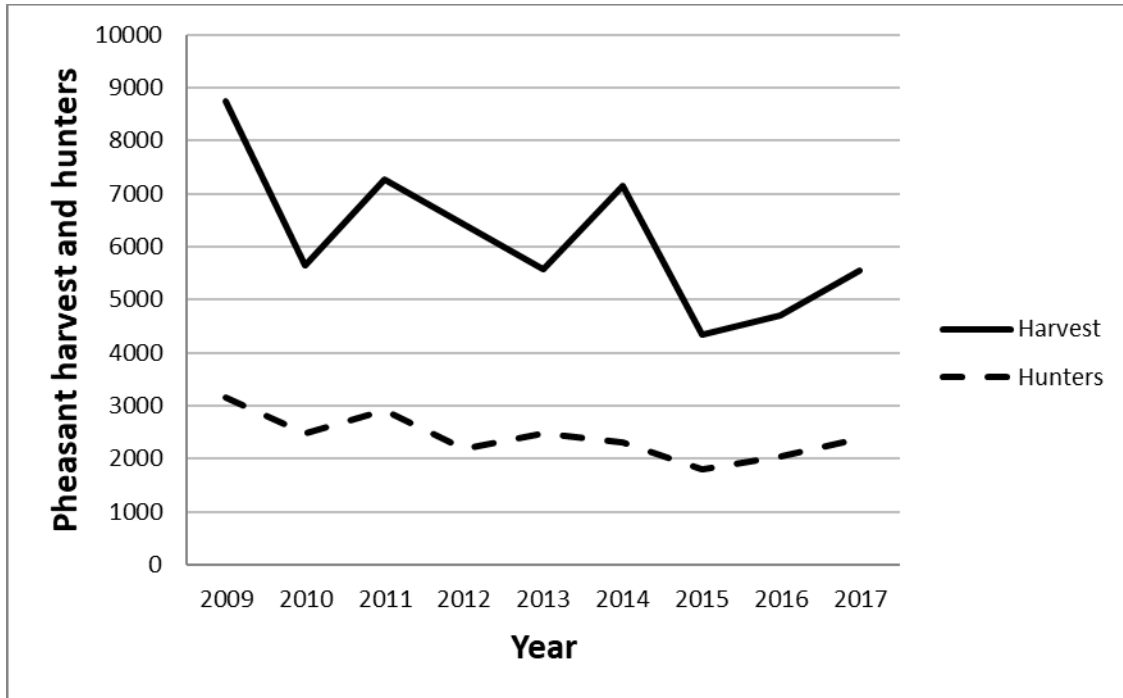


Figure 6. Pheasants harvested and pheasant hunters in District 4.

Each summer, biologists with the Yakama Nation conduct pheasant productivity surveys. In 2017, 0.18 pheasants were observed per mile (Figure 7). This count is below their 10-year average of 0.29. Pheasant populations are often limited by cold, wet weather, especially in the spring breeding season. Biologists have noted a fair number of broods in 2018, so hopefully this leads to an increasing trend.

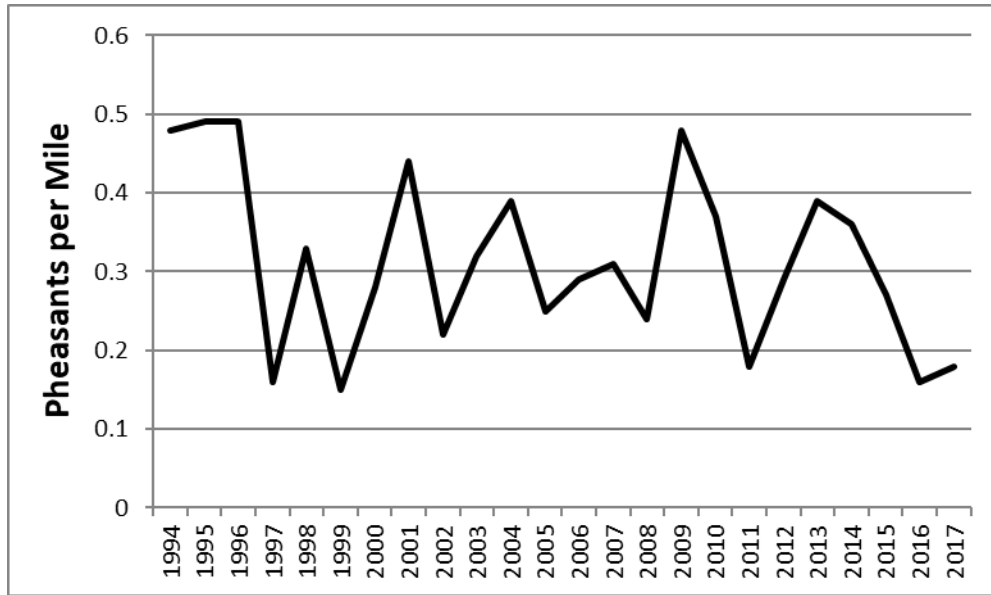


Figure 7. Pheasants per mile during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation at <http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php>.

Pheasant hunters should focus efforts in dense weedy and grassy areas adjacent to wetlands, streams, and irrigation waterways. Birds may also be found around irrigated farmland. Some of the best pheasant habitat in the district is in north Franklin County on and surrounding WDFW’s Windmill Ranch Unit (nontoxic shot), Mesa Lake Unit, and the Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Each of these hunting areas has two designated parking areas where hunters are required to park and register, and each allows a maximum of eight vehicles per lot. Other areas with good pheasant habitat include USFWS’ Hanford Reach National Monument’s East Wahluke Unit, Ringold (GMU 379), and [Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge](#) along the Columbia River, near the town of Paterson.

Going after birds planted as part of WDFW’s [Pheasant Enhancement Program](#) is a great way to work dogs and get kids involved in hunting. Last year, WDFW planted pheasants at three locations: the Hope Valley Unit of the WDFW Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area, and the Big Flat and Lost Island Habitat Management Units (HMU) held by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) (Figure 8). ****New for 2018, WDFW and USACE are working to add the Toothacker site in Benton County as a pheasant release site. Fire burned the site in 2013 but the habitat appears to have returned sufficiently to allow releases of pheasant here again.** Pheasant release site locations can be found on the [GoHunt](#) website or at the program link above. Army Corps HMUs information is available [here](#). Nontoxic shot is required at all pheasant release sites.

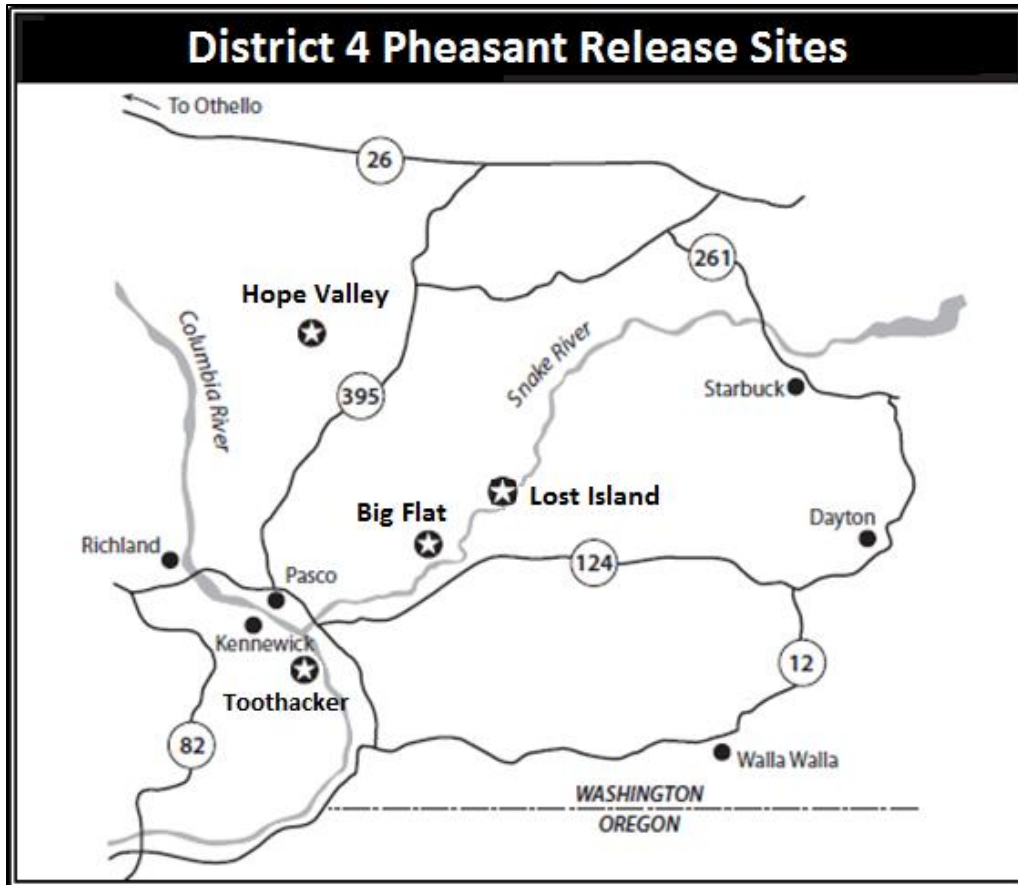


Figure 8. Location of proposed District 4 pheasant release sites for 2018.

QUAIL

Abundant California quail are present in the district. There has been a decreasing trend in harvest numbers over the past decade (Figure 5). Surveys conducted by the Yakama Nation show that quail numbers vary greatly year to year, but 2017 saw a decline for quail in the region (Figure 9). The 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.

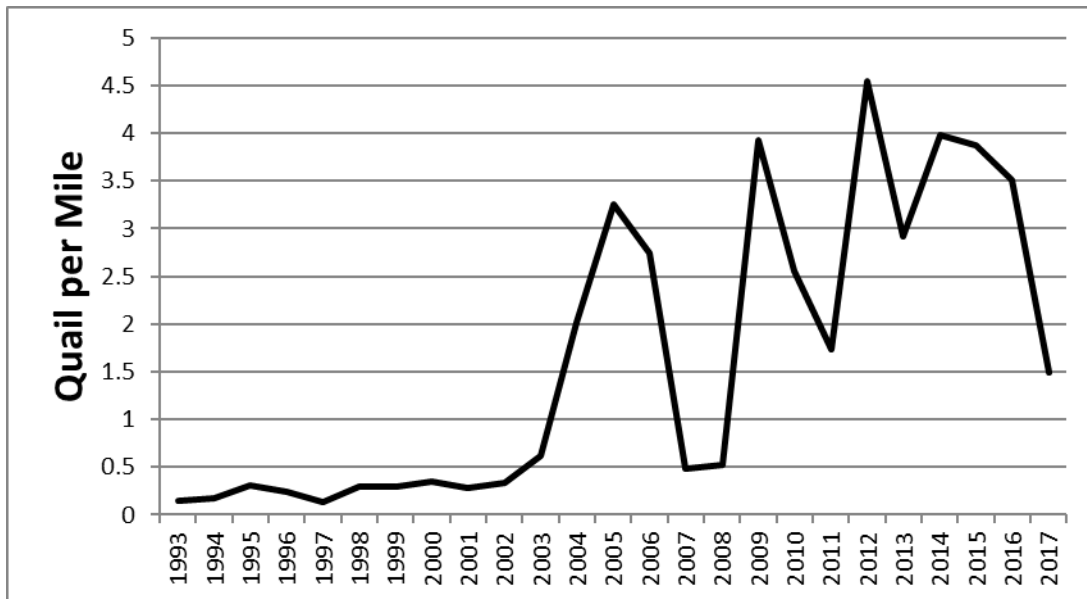


Figure 9. Average quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation at <http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php>.

DOVE

Mourning dove harvest in District 4 has been increasing over the past several years (Figure 5). Harvest numbers for 2017 remains close to the record harvest from 2015. There should be opportunity for hunters to find doves moving through the area and in local patches where production has been successful. 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.

Licensed small game hunters are also encouraged to harvest Eurasian collared doves, an introduced exotic species that has spread across North America. They are larger than mourning doves with a square tail and thin black half-collar on the back of their necks. This species is usually most abundant in rural-suburban areas near mature trees. Numbers have been increasing across eastern Washington since first appearing in the state in 1990s. There is no limit and a year round season for collared dove in Washington, though a hunting license (big or small game) is needed.

WATERFOWL

There are many places to hunt ducks and geese in the district. Small ponds and lakes can be found on WDFW’s Windmill Ranch Unit, Mesa Lake Unit, and Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. This year, wetland management activities will result in increased open water areas at the

Windmill and Bailie Youth Ranches in time for duck season. Continued management of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area units will result in more habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for hunters in the coming years. Scootney Reservoir, managed by the [Bureau of Reclamation](#), can also provide good hunting. The Snake and Columbia rivers and associated water bodies will hold tens of thousands of ducks when the cold weather sets in. Access can be gained at the USFWS McNary and Umatilla NWRs and the Hanford Reach National Monument.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, please see [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting](#) on the WDFW website.

The five-year average of ducks harvested in District 4 over the past decade has been increasing while the goose harvest has been fairly stable (Figure 10). After the season opener, hunter success will likely taper off as the local ducks become educated and restrict their daytime movements to local reserves and sanctuaries. At that point, hunters will likely 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.

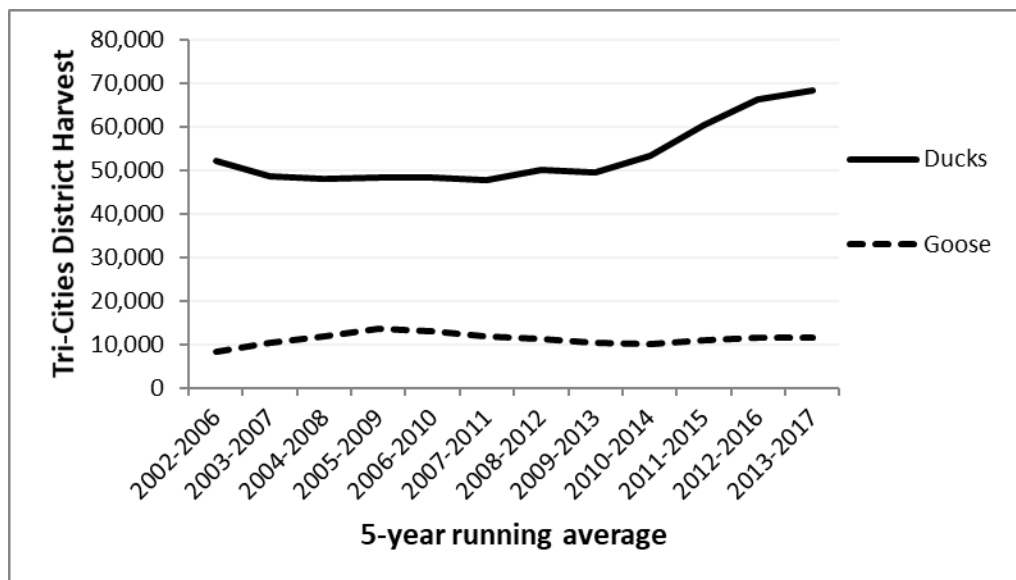


Figure 10. District 4 waterfowl harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

Canada geese nest on various river islands in the district and counts indicate a continued upward recovery since decreases in the early 2000s. 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 hunters will want to secure permission before hunting.

Changes to the statewide goose bag limit in 2017 set daily limits for snow and white-fronted geese in addition to Canada/cackling (dark) geese limits. While white-fronted geese and the majority of snow geese usually pass through the district before and after the season (Figure 11),

an increasing number of snow geese have been present in the district during goose season. This may help District 4 hunters when snow geese are present. Snow geese are sometimes found in large flocks on farmland near the Snake or Columbia Rivers and McNary NWR, but a few can occasionally mix in with large flocks of dark geese at any location.

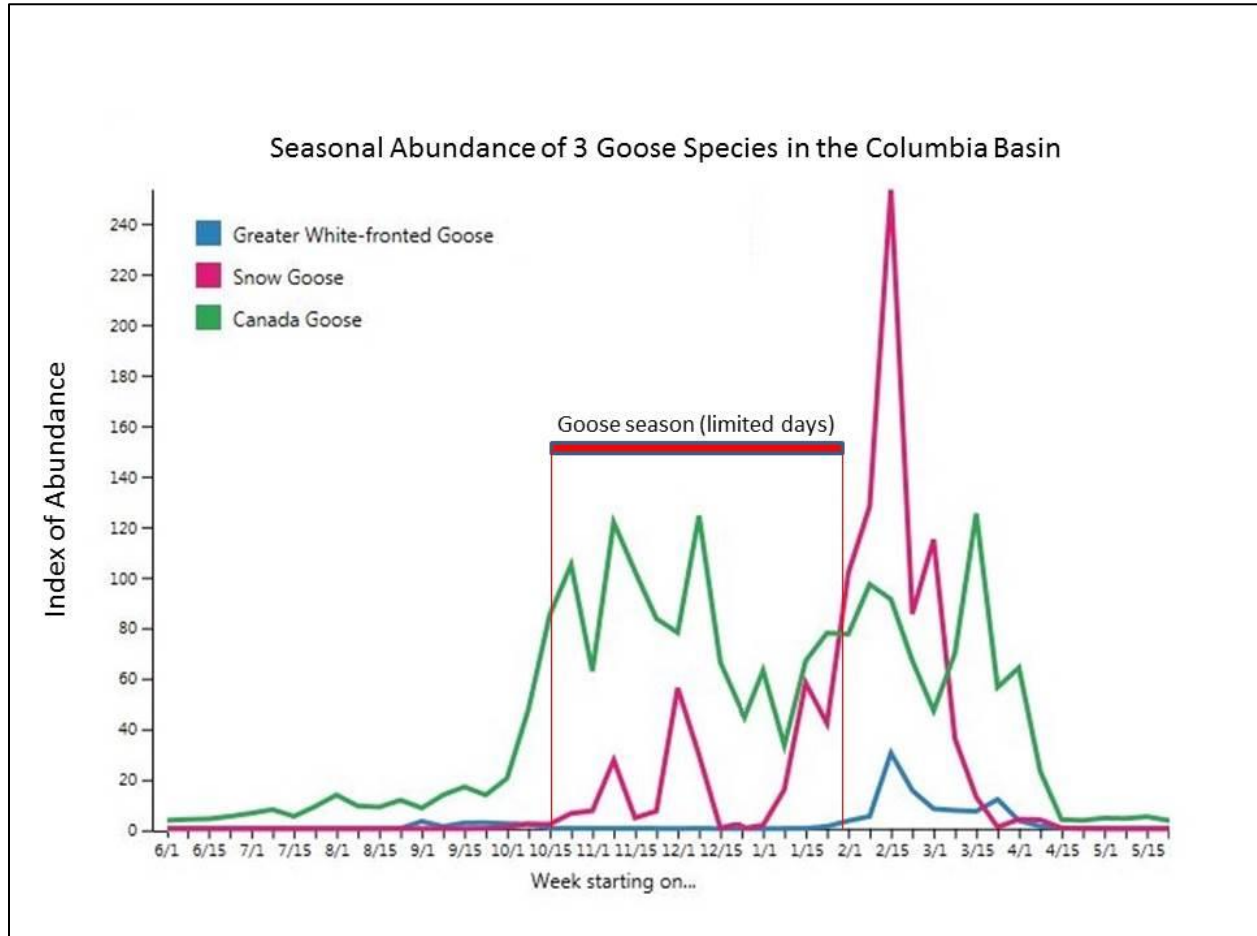


Figure 11. Seasonal abundance of three goose species in the Columbia Basin relative to hunting seasons. Data source: eBird.org

The Cropland Hunting Access Initiative is a program aimed at increasing waterfowl hunting access in the Columbia Basin. Benton and Franklin county farmers are currently being contacted to determine their interest in delaying tillage of corn and wheat stubble and providing hunter access on those acres. To ensure a quality hunting experience, properties are open for hunting only on goose days, and can be reserved via the Hunt by Reservation system. Watch the [WDFW website](#) for updated maps and directions to these fields in the coming weeks.



Image 3. Goose harvest in the Tri-Cities.

In January-March 2017, an outbreak of avian cholera occurred at the end of the hunting season in the Tri-Cities area. The past two summers, a Botulism outbreak has killed several hundred more. There is no long-term impact to regional waterfowl populations expected from these incidents and the diseases pose no risks to human health. Hunters and the public are always encouraged to report observations of groups of more than 10 sick or dead birds to the regional WDFW office at 509-575-2740, or use the online form [here](#) .

MAJOR PUBLIC LANDS

Hunting access in Benton and Franklin counties is more limited than some other parts of the state, as much of the district is held in private ownership or by federal agencies that do not allow hunting. However, quality opportunities on both public and private land do exist and WDFW is continually working to expand hunting access.

SUNNYSIDE-SNAKE RIVER WILDLIFE AREA

This wildlife area (Figure 12) comprises WDFW-owned land in the district and most parcels are open to hunting, but with specific restrictions at some units. Most of the units are managed specifically for wildlife, and enhanced hunting opportunities are possible through crop, habitat, and wetland management. For more information, please visit the [WDFW website](#).

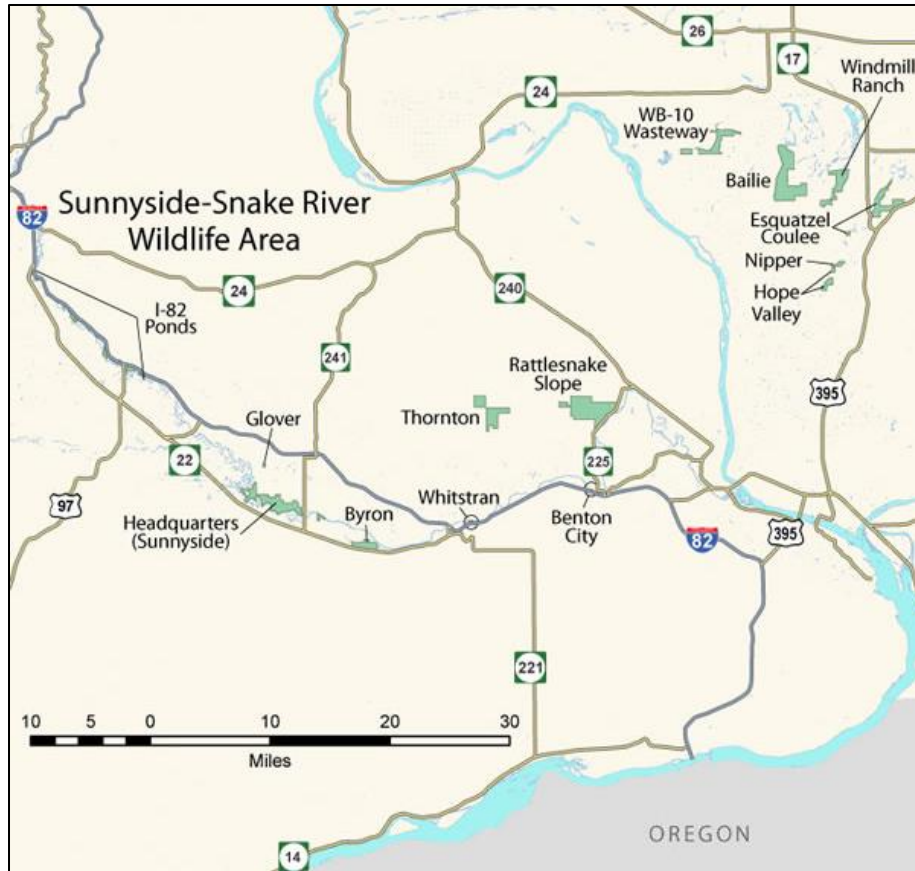


Figure 12. Map of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area units. *Mesa Lake Unit not pictured.

MID-COLUMBIA RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

The USFWS allows hunting on a number of units of this refuge complex, including a portion of the Hanford Reach National Monument, a portion of the Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge, and certain areas within the McNary National Wildlife Refuge. Hunting regulations and maps can be found [here](#).

THE COLUMBIA RIVER

All islands, except privately owned islands, and the Benton County shoreline below the high water mark, Central Hanford Department of Energy property, and any peninsula originating on the Benton County shoreline between Vernita Bridge on Highway 24 downstream to the Richland city limits are designated as closed areas to hunting wild animals and wild birds. The only exception is waterfowl hunting, which is open below the high water mark between the old Hanford town site power line crossing (wooden towers) and the Richland city limits. These details are printed in the [Big Game Regulations](#) on page 91. Several other closures and reserves impact river hunting in the district (Figure 13).

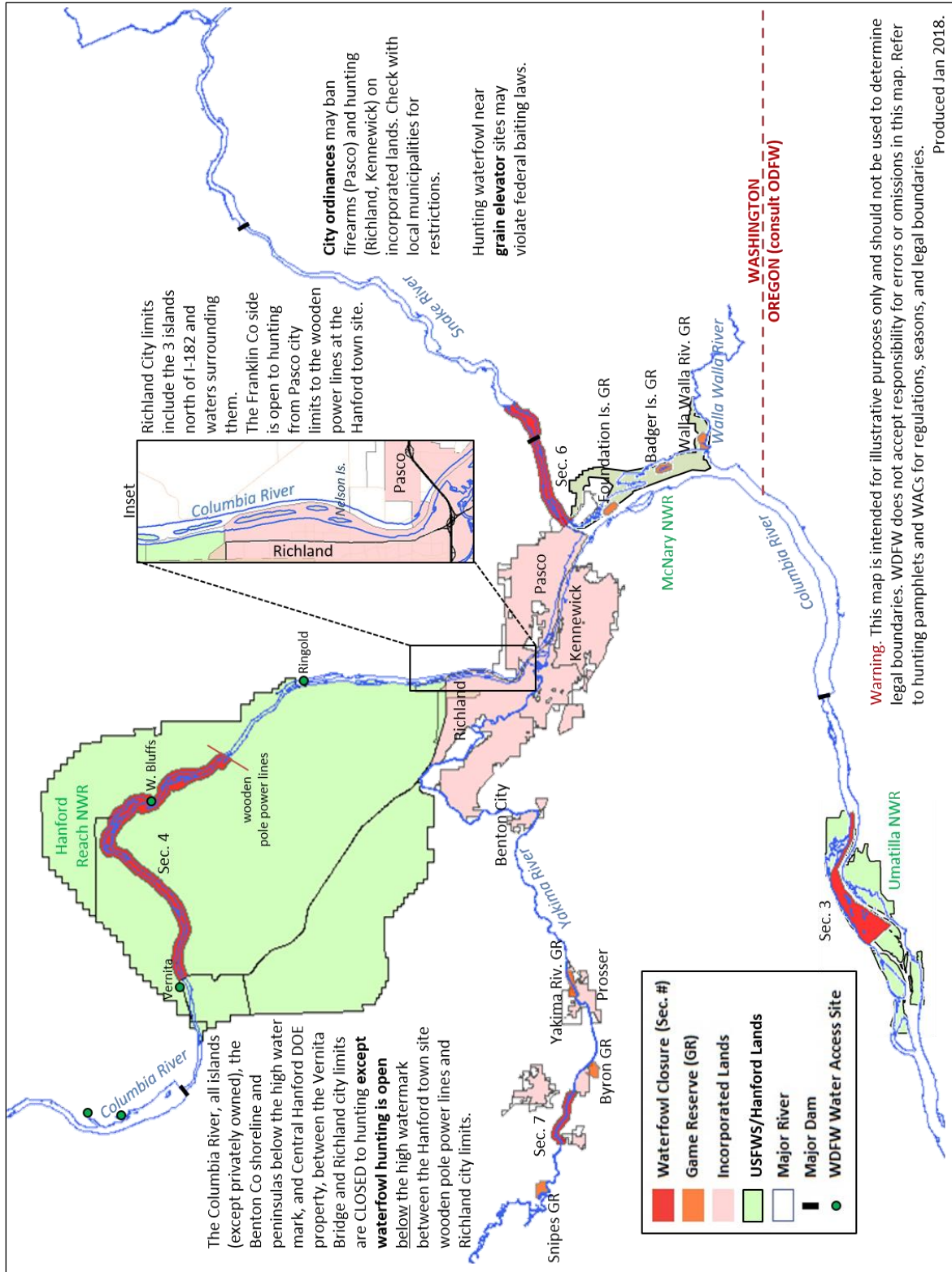


Figure 13. Generalized map of Tri-cities Area rivers, game reserves, closures, and municipalities.

OTHER PUBLIC LANDS

The DNR manages land that is open to hunting unless otherwise posted. Benton and Franklin counties have a large amount of DNR acreage, but it is often leased to private landowners. While leased land is still open to hunting, hunters should always be aware that adjacent landowners are often managing DNR land as part of their business operations, and hunters should be respectful of property boundaries. Consult a public lands map or [GoHunt](#) for more information.

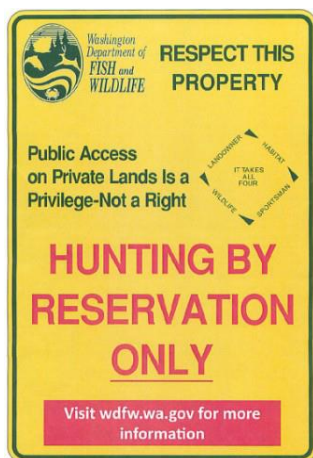
Various other public agencies own or manage land within Benton and Franklin counties that may also be open to hunting. BLM allows hunting at [Juniper Dunes](#) and other properties within the district. The USACE and the Bureau of Reclamation also allow hunting on portions of their land. Maps and regulations for some of the USACE habitat management units can be found here: [HMU.pdf](#)

PRIVATE LANDS

WDFW provides and maintains a Private Lands Access program that allows the public to hunt on land owned by cooperating private landowners. In most cases, these landowners receive no financial compensation for their enrollment in the program, and hunters should always respect their property and rules. By being a responsible guest on these private lands, hunters can help ensure they remain open for years to come and will continue to enhance WDFW's mission to expand private lands access. Access properties frequently change year to year and sometimes even within a season. Double check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public and in the same access program each year.

Information about private lands access sites, including site-specific regulations, locations, season availability, and contact information, can be found [here](#) and at [GoHunt](#).

There are four private land programs, and although each provides public, walk-in only access to private land, they function differently.



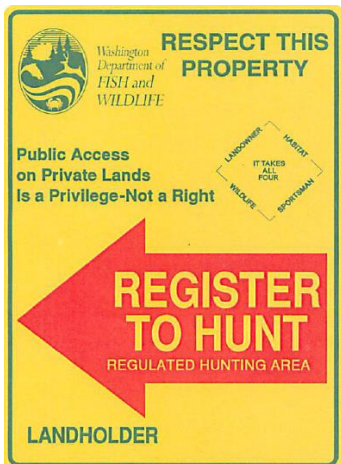
Hunt by Reservation

The Hunt by Reservation program requires hunters to register online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/type/56/. Hunters are required to print out and carry a permit, and they are provided a map of the property. In Benton and Franklin counties, multiple opportunities are available for both big game and bird hunting. More information about using the reservation sites can be found [here](#).



Feel Free to Hunt

Feel Free to Hunt is the largest access program in District 4, with dozens of properties totaling around 100,000 acres. It allows hunters to access designated land at any time during established hunting seasons. Most District 4 Feel Free to Hunt properties provide access for mule deer hunting, with some potential for upland bird hunting as well.



Register to Hunt

District 4 has several Register to Hunt sites in Benton County. Register to Hunt requires hunters to sign in at registration kiosks and carry a permit with them. District 4's Register to Hunt sites primarily provide waterfowl and upland bird hunting opportunities.



Hunt by Written Permission

Hunt by Written Permission sites require hunters to make contact with the landowner. Landowners then issue permits to hunters at their discretion and hunters are expected to carry this permit while they hunt. Landowner contact information can be found on the signs at the site. There are several Hunt by Written Permission properties within District 4, primarily in Franklin County, and they provide opportunities for both big game and bird hunting.

ONLINE TOOLS AND MAPS

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU and Permit Hunt for all game species are online at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/harvest/>.

****New for 2018.** WDFW has released a new regulations web map to search for game seasons and private land access around the state: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/maps.html>.

A good starting point for hunters looking for a place to hunt is the GoHunt website at <http://apps.wdfw.wa.gov/gohunt/>. GoHunt is a valuable resource that provides hunters with information about public and private lands access points, GMU boundaries, landscape features such as roads and topography, public lands, and a great deal more (Figure 14).

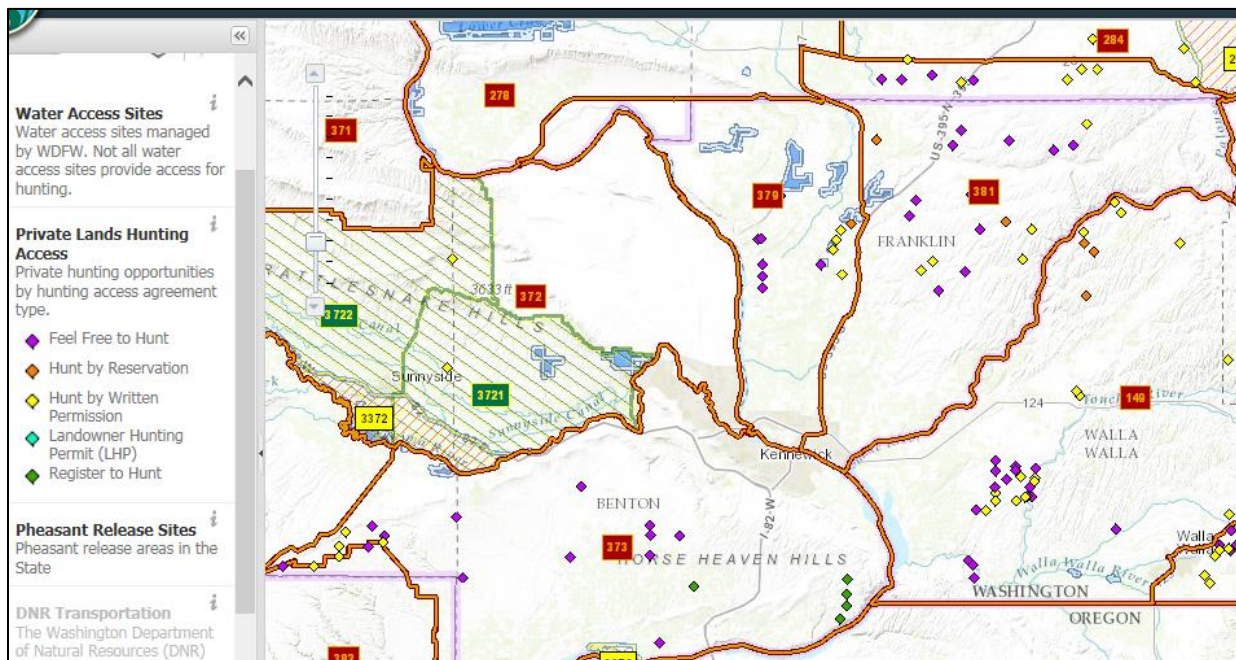


Figure 14. Depiction of private lands access in District 4 from WDFW's GoHunt website.