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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 County, 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 (DNR). As 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 (GMUs 418 and 426), which are mostly in Whatcom County, and Sauk (GMU 437), which is almost entirely within Skagit County. Additionally, portions of North Sound, Stillaguamish, and Cascade (GMUs 407, 448, and 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 with the highest concentration of waterfowl in western Washington.
- A diversity of waterfowl hunting options, including lesser snow geese, Canada 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.
- Special 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 six permit holders within the Mount Baker Wilderness Area.

### CURRENT SPECIES STATUS

The primary big game species in District 14 are elk, black-tailed deer, cougar, black bear, and mountain goat. Each of these species remains open for hunting with restrictions, as outlined in [Washington's 2018 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations](#). Black-tailed deer, black bear, elk (GMUs 407 and 448 only), and cougar continue to provide over the counter tag opportunities in District 14. Elk (GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941), spring black bear, and mountain goats are managed as special permit 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. Pheasants are an exception, and WDFW will continue to implement a pen-raised pheasant release program in Skagit and Whatcom counties in 2018 – 2019. Other game birds that WDFW manages collectively as forest grouse include the ruffed grouse and dusky and sooty grouse. Dusky and sooty grouse (formerly referred to as blue grouse) occur in District 14 and continue to have long seasons (September 1 – December 31), with a daily bag limit of four of any species and no more than three of one 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 the district, hunting of 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 by March 20, 2019, even if they did not harvest any birds. Hunters should reference the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl and Upland Game Seasons](#) pamphlet for more information.

## 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 a year.

Based on the post-hunt survey conducted in March 2018, the total population size of the North Cascades herd within the survey area is approximately 1,600 animals. The 2018 survey indicated a bull to cow ratio of 25 bulls per 100 cows, just above the WDFW objective of 12 to 20 bulls per 100 cows. The calf to cow ratio was estimated at 32 calves per 100 cows. A calf to cow ratio of 40 calves or greater per 100 cows is considered excellent recruitment.



Although the North Cascades elk herd continues to recover, the desired population objective 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, hunting opportunities have been few but are increasing. The current harvest strategy provides some recreational and damage-related harvest while allowing the population to continue to grow.

The North Cascades elk herd offers one of the premier bull elk hunting opportunities in western Washington. Those archery, muzzleloader, and modern firearm hunters who are fortunate enough to draw a permit have the chance to harvest a bull elk with an “any bull” only tag. The harvest success rate is high for all three hunt method 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 2017, the harvest success rate in GMU 418 (also included Elk Area 4941 during the 2017 season) was 73 percent, with 19 of 26 hunters who drew permits harvesting a bull elk. Youth hunters, hunters 65 and older, and hunters with disabilities that drew tags in Elk Area 4941 experienced a high success rate (83 percent) in 2017, with 15 of 18 hunters harvesting elk.



Elk hunting opportunities for 2018 are restricted to special permit hunts in GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941 (which is within GMU 437). A total of 42 any bull permits have been allocated (26 permits in GMU 418 and 16 permits in Elk Area 4941), with opportunities for hunters using archery, modern firearm, and muzzleloaders. Hunters successful in drawing a permit for GMU 418 should note that they are not allowed to also hunt Elk Area 4941, as permitted in previous years. The WDFW Private Lands Access program has partnered with Sierra Pacific Industries to provide access to their properties within GMU 418 for all special permit holders. Information about access to these lands will be provided to permit holders prior to the 2018 hunts.

In Elk Area 4941, 30 total additional permit opportunities for antlerless elk are available for Master Hunters, youth, seniors, and hunters with disabilities during the 2018 season. The hunting opportunities within Elk Area 4941 occur primarily on private land, so coordination with landowners and WDFW is vital in making this hunt successful. Permit holders for Elk Area 4941 will be provided more information about the hunt area prior to the 2018 hunts.

General season harvest opportunities for any elk 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 key to getting a real opportunity.

Changes to the 2018 hunting regulations specific to the North Cascades elk herd include:

- Increase in bull elk permits in Elk Area 4941 (from six in 2017 to 16 in 2018)
- Increased opportunities for antlerless elk harvest by Master Hunters, youth hunters, hunters with disabilities, and hunters age 65 or older in Elk Area 4941
- Hunters who hold permits for GMU 418 are not permitted to hunt in Elk Area 4941, as in previous years

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found at [Game Harvest Reports](#). Hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage for more information on access to private lands and a link to the [GoHunt Online Mapping tool](#). The GoHunt mapping tool is an invaluable resource for hunters that provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, game harvest data and regulations, game management unit (GMU) boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines.

## DEER

WDFW currently does not conduct black-tailed deer surveys in District 14, largely due to the difficulty in accurately surveying deer in dense, western Washington habitats. Biologist observations and other anecdotal reports support the general notion that black-tailed deer population numbers and densities are down in GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), 437 (Sauk), and 450 (Cascade). Conversely, portions of GMU 407 (North Sound), the most urbanized GMU in the district, have quite high local deer densities, causing a nuisance for some property owners and agricultural operations.



Photo by WDFW

A total of 739 deer were reported harvested during the 2017 general season in District 14 GMUs. This represents a decrease in harvest compared to the 2016 season harvest of 976. From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 provides the best opportunity for successfully harvesting a deer in District 14. In 2017, 469 deer were harvested in GMU 407 during the general season hunts, a decrease from the 2016 harvest of 553 deer. The next best option for hunters, based on the 2017 harvest of 195 deer, is GMU 437. The combined general season deer harvest within the other GMUs in the district (418 and 426), was 75 deer.

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. GMU 407 provides hunting opportunities that the other GMUs do not and hunters have learned to adapt to this and take advantage of it. The key to a successful harvest in GMU 407 is securing the appropriate permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area prior to the hunting season. Hunters who intend to hunt deer in developed areas would be well advised to view page 92 of [Washington's 2018 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations](#) booklet and check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions.

Within District 14, some hunting opportunities exist on private industrial timberlands and property managed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources, but these areas are largely gated due to timber theft, dumping, vandalism, and other problems. Many of these areas can be accessed on foot or with mountain bikes, allowing those willing to do the work an opportunity to hunt deer that do not receive as much hunting pressure. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.





Modern firearm hunters in District 14 may apply for a permit only, quality buck hunt in GMUs 418, 426, and 437. These quality buck tags provide some of the best opportunities for success among deer hunters in the district and allow hunters an opportunity to hunt a quality buck during the rut (November 1-14). The number of days available to hunt has increased from six days in 2017 to 14 days in 2018. Hunter success rates during the 2017 season were 43 percent (GMU 418), 59 percent (GMU 437), and 67 percent (GMU 426) for hunters who participated. Sixty tags were issued, and hunters reported harvesting a total of 23 bucks. Thirteen of these bucks were harvested in GMU 437. WDFW was able to negotiate access to Sierra Pacific properties for the 25 permit holders in GMU 418 during the 2017 season and will provide the same opportunity for 2018 hunters.

Finally, for those seeking a high elevation, trophy black-tailed deer hunting experience, areas within GMUs 418, 426, and 437 that can be accessed by U.S. Forest Service road and trail systems lead to high mountain hunting areas such as the Mount Baker and Pasayten wilderness areas 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 (September 15–25).

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found at [Game Harvest Reports](#). Hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage for more information on access to private lands and a link to the [GoHunt Online Mapping tool](#). The GoHunt mapping tool is an invaluable resource for hunters that provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, game harvest data and regulations, game management unit (GMU) boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines.

## BEAR

Although black bear surveys are not conducted in Washington, the statewide population is estimated to be between 25,000 and 30,000 animals. Hunter harvest reports and age data obtained from premolar teeth submitted by successful hunters are used to determine age and sex ratios and infer population size and trends. This information helps WDFW set bear harvest guidelines.

The total number of bears harvested during the fall hunt of 2017 in GMUs 407, 418, 426, and 437 was comparable to the number of bears harvested during the 2016 season. Of 1,200 hunters, 109 bears were harvested in these GMUs during the fall, with almost half of the bears harvested in GMU 418 (10 percent success rate).



District 14 hunters that choose to hunt in GMUs 418 and 426 will be hunting in a grizzly bear recovery area identified by WDFW. Prior to hunting, each bear hunter must successfully

complete the annual WDFW online bear identification test by passing the exam with a score of 80 percent or higher and carry proof that they have passed the WDFW test or an equivalent test from another state.

Opportunities for harvesting a black bear in District 14 have more to do with access and berry production than does the previous year's harvest. With a cool spring and low early summer temperatures, berry production should be late 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 and pack out can pursue bears in classic alpine environments where spot-and-stalk opportunities await.

GMU 418 is one of the few western Washington GMUs, and the only GMU in District 14, where a spring bear hunt is promoted to address damage caused by bears peeling young trees (primarily Douglas fir) on commercially managed forest lands. Additionally, the hunter access program managed by WDFW helps get this small pool of hunters behind private gates where bears are otherwise not disturbed by hunters. In the spring of 2018, three of 30 permit holders reported a bear harvest in the damage area during the two month season (April 15–June 15), for a success rate of ten percent. Special permit hunts for the 2019 spring season will be announced in late fall 2018, and the submission period for applications will be January 2 – February 28, 2019.



## COUGAR

Cougar hunting opportunities in District 14 are opportunistic, with most cougars harvested by hunters who happen upon a cougar while pursuing other game. A hunter who wants to harvest a cougar must be carrying a valid big game license, which includes cougar as a species option, prior to harvesting. The use of dogs to recreationally pursue and harvest cougars is illegal statewide. Hunters may harvest cougars during the early (September 1 – December 31) and late (January 1 – April 30) season.

Hunters should note that most GMUs in District 14, with the exception of GMU 407, are covered by a cougar harvest guideline. GMUs 418, 426, and 437 have a harvest guideline of 11–15 animals and GMUs 448 and 450 have a harvest guideline of 10–13 animals. In those GMUs covered under a harvest guideline, WDFW may close the late hunting season after January 1 if cougar harvest, to that point, meets or exceeds the guideline. During the late season, cougar hunters may hunt cougar from January 1 until the hunt area harvest guideline has been reached and the GMU is closed by WDFW, or until April 30, whichever occurs first. It is each hunter's responsibility to verify if the cougar late hunting season is open or closed by calling the toll free cougar hunting hotline (1-866-364-4868) or visiting the WDFW webpage for [Cougar Hunting Area Openings and Closures](#). The hotline and webpage will be updated weekly beginning January 1, 2019. In 2017, the cougar harvest did not exceed the guideline and the units remained open throughout the season.

Hunters should remember that a 2018 hunting license is good from April 1, 2018 – March 31, 2019. If a hunter wants to hunt cougar during the month of April 2019, a 2019 cougar license/tag is required. All successful cougar hunters must report cougar harvest to the WDFW hotline within 72 hours and must contact a WDFW office or call to set up an appointment to have the pelt sealed within five days of the notification.

## 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.

Applying for a goat tag is a commitment to spend a fair amount of time in rugged, high elevation terrain that can be as treacherous as it is awe inspiring. A prospective hunter would be well served to scout the available units thoroughly to see if they are up to the challenge prior to applying for a hunt.

For 2018, six special permits were issued for the three mountain goat hunt areas in District 14, Chowder Ridge, Lincoln Peak, and Avalanche Gorge. A single tag holder will have sole access to the Chowder Ridge hunt area north of Mount Baker. The remaining five permit holders (two

in Lincoln Peak and three in the Avalanche Gorge hunt units) may be sharing these units with the winners of the statewide auction and raffle permits.

Statewide harvest success rates for mountain goats are generally 75 percent or greater in any year, and Mount Baker has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. In 2017, five out of six permit holders were successful, all harvesting males.

WDFW strongly encourages hunters to refrain from shooting nannies. Although nannies can be legally taken by permit holders, mountain goat populations are very sensitive to the removal of adult females. Beginning in 2018, mountain goat hunt applicants drawn for a permit may only purchase their license after successfully completing the WDFW online mountain goat gender identification training. Additionally, please review the educational material sent to you if you draw a permit and make all efforts to harvest a male goat, or billy.



A hunter who kills a mountain goat in Washington must present the head with horns attached for inspection within 10 days to a WDFW Regional or District office or a location designated by a WDFW representative. Call a WDFW Regional or District office to schedule an appointment with a biologist for inspection. After inspection, the head/horns of a lawfully harvested mountain goat in Washington may be kept for personal use.

## UPLAND BIRD

As mentioned previously, 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 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 upland game hunting opportunities that do exist in the district include WDFW-released [pheasants](#), [forest grouse](#), band-tailed pigeons, and an ever growing population of Eurasian collared doves. For more information on upland bird hunting in Washington, hunters can visit the WDFW [upland bird](#) webpage.

### PHEASANT

The purpose of the pheasant program in western Washington is to provide additional upland bird hunting opportunity. This program encourages participation from new, young, and seasoned hunters. Naturally sustained pheasant populations are limited in western Washington due to the cool wet climate and the lack of grain farming. Each year, 35,000 to 40,000 pheasants are released on approximately 25 release sites throughout western Washington.

Pheasants will be released this fall on sites which are mapped on the [GoHunt](#) webpage. In Skagit County, WDFW will release pheasants at the Samish Unit in 2018 once prior to youth and senior hunts only. The remaining pheasants on the site can be hunted until the opening of waterfowl season, but no additional releases will occur. The three pheasant release sites in Whatcom County are the WDFW Lake Terrell Wildlife Area, Alcoa Intalco Works site, and British Petroleum Cherry Point Refinery site. Depending on the site and availability of pheasants, somewhere between 30 and 65 birds are released at least three times each week, mainly on weekends. Nontoxic shot is required on all pheasant release sites. Pheasant hunters should check the [Western Washington Pheasant Release Program](#) and the [GoHunt](#) webpage for the location of specific sites.

### FOREST GROUSE

Ruffed grouse and sooty (formerly called blue) grouse are present throughout the public and private forest lands in District 14. Exceptionally warm and dry spring weather has had a positive effect on grouse brood production and survival this season. Sooty grouse in particular have shown up this summer, with an abundance of large broods in alpine meadows. A pointing dog and shotgun in a mountain meadow would make for a unique upland hunting experience. The prospects for harvesting sooty grouse increase 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.

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 feet, particularly in riparian forest habitats, early seral forests (5-25 years old), and deciduous-conifer mixed forest types. Abandoned logging roads provide good habitat for grouse and opportunities for hunting. Be mindful of rules regarding loaded weapons in vehicles and shooting on roadways. 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 the target and backstop.

### **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. Interested hunters should 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 they are hunting in an area without firearm restrictions and in a manner compatible with existing infrastructure (i.e., be mindful of buildings, farm equipment, or power lines).

### **TURKEY**

Wild turkeys remain relatively rare in District 14, with no predictable concentrations of birds. Accordingly, harvest prospects remain low even with considerable effort. In 2017, twenty-three hunters reported a harvest of five turkeys, for a success rate of 23 percent. Hunters may use archery equipment, a crossbow, or a shotgun or muzzleloading shotgun shooting number 4 or smaller shot to hunt turkey.

### **BAND-TAILED PIGEON**

The native band-tailed pigeon is the largest of Washington's pigeons and doves. Harvest of band-tailed pigeons has been on the decrease, and this is most likely associated with a decrease in hunter interest. Single day surveys from July 2018 at historic mineral sites in Skagit and Whatcom counties suggest above average numbers of these pigeons are present. The 2018 season runs from September 15–23 and provides a nine day hunting opportunity that coincides with the migration. A small game license, state migratory bird permit, and migratory bird authorization card is required, and the daily limit is two birds.



A solid hunting 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. During the 2017 season, Skagit County was again the state's second best duck producing county (following Grant County), with a harvest of 57,506 birds, up 2 percent from 2016 and 15 percent higher than the five year average for years 2012–2016. The 2017 duck harvest for neighboring Whatcom County was 25,003, down 18 percent from 2016 and down 11 percent from the five year average for years 2012–2016.

Reports from breeding sites important to this area indicate abundant water in breeding ponds. This should make for a good year of brood production, and duck hunting should be the best in recent times.

Early season hunting opportunities in District 14 are generally much more favorable on the saltwater marshes. Hunters can expect a mixed bag on opening day, as some species such as



blue-winged teal and wood duck have yet to leave for southern wintering grounds. Big numbers of northern breeding ducks arrive in late October and November, making for better bags of mallards later in the season. Saltwater hunts in Skagit County are generally launched from ramps at Conway, Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters on Wylie Slough, or the ramp under the twin bridges over the Swinomish Channel on Highway 20. Typically, the three major bays in Skagit County (Samish, Padilla, and Skagit) feature a majority of pintails, wigeon, and mallards. Boat access greatly improves hunting options and prospects. Both private and public uplands in Skagit and Whatcom counties contain good food resources (corn, barley), which provide good hunting prospects for dabbling ducks when harsh winter conditions ultimately arrive.

Hunters have several resources to help them get started if they want to hunt waterfowl in District 14. If you are new to hunting waterfowl, please visit the WDFW webpage [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting](#) for an excellent introduction to the sport. Looking for a place to hunt in Skagit County? The [Skagit Wildlife Area Waterfowl Hunting Guide](#) provides information on an excellent public waterfowl hunting location within District 14. Additionally, hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage for more information on access to private lands and a link to the [GoHunt Online Mapping tool](#). The GoHunt mapping tool is an invaluable resource for hunters that provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, game harvest data and regulations, game management unit (GMU) boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines.

## **BRANT AND SEA DUCKS**

Brant wintering in Padilla and Samish Bays mostly belong to a race that nests in a small area in the western Canadian high arctic. These gray-bellied birds resemble East Coast brant more than typical western black brant. Because of their limited nesting and wintering grounds, this population is vulnerable to over harvest. When surveys show there are fewer than 3,000 birds in Skagit County, the season is canceled. Two separate surveys in December 2017 indicated a population between 3,000 and 6,000, so the January 2018 hunt was shortened to three days. A brant hunt will occur in Skagit County in January 2019 if surveys conducted in December 2018 indicate a sufficient number of birds. Please check the WDFW website for details after January 1, 2019.



The trial, three-day brant season in Whatcom County in 2018 was deemed a success and will be continued in January 2019. The dates for this hunt will be January 12, 16, and 19.

Brant hunters also have opportunities to harvest sea ducks, including harlequin ducks, long-tailed ducks, and scoters. A special migratory bird authorization card is required to hunt both brant and sea ducks.



## LESSER SNOW GEESE

As one of the mainstays of Skagit waterfowl hunting, snow goose hunting provides an alternative to hunting dabbling ducks in District 14. Daily bag limits of six white geese reflect a healthy population. Harvest of snow geese from the Washington state component of this population was up in the 2017 season. High numbers of juvenile birds (indicating a good breeding season) were most likely responsible for last year's good harvest. Largely, the harvest rate of snow geese is tied to the proportion of juvenile birds that arrive from their Siberian breeding grounds. Word from the colony on Wrangell Island that produces our geese is that numbers of breeding pairs remained at an all-time high in 2017 but that productivity was down from the last two record years.

White geese are adapting to changing land use and crop conditions in Skagit County, which has an impact on their distribution during hunting season. Hunters interested in harvesting snow geese will also have to adapt and work to stay ahead of the game. It is critical to gain hunting area access before the season. Early season is the best time to lure geese, particularly juveniles, with decoys. During this period, hunting in corn stubble is a popular technique used by hunters to achieve success. As the season progresses, snow goose diets appear to diversify, and geese may be found feeding in a variety of crop fields, including winter wheat, hay or silage, and potatoes. Snow geese are most abundant on public and private land on Fir Island in District 14. However, geese continue to spend time in areas on either side of Interstate 5, north of Burlington, and also in the Edison area. Be sure to have permission before hunting private lands and be aware of special snow goose hunting rules for Skagit County.



This year there will be a change in season structure for white geese (lesser snow, Ross', and blue geese) in Goose Management Area 1 (Skagit and Snohomish counties). The 2018-2019 season will include a late hunting season for white goose only from February 9-20. Two short closures will be observed during the October through January hunt, one from November 26 through December 7 and one from January 28 through February 8, to allow for the February hunt. All normal regulations regarding plugged shotguns, non-motorized decoys, and bag limits apply. This late season will extend the waterfowl hunting opportunity in Skagit and Snohomish counties well past the normal closing date and will provide exciting hunting opportunity for this highly sought after waterfowl species. Hunters should note that many WDFW lands will be closed to goose hunting during this late season opportunity (see page 20 in the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons pamphlet](#)). The bag limit for white goose is six birds, with a possession limit of 18. The WDFW Private Lands Access program will be partnering with private landowners to provide increased public access on private lands for this late season goose opportunity.

For a thorough introduction to waterfowl hunting, visit the [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting webpage](#). Hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage for more information on access to private lands and a link to the [GoHunt Online Mapping tool](#). The GoHunt mapping tool is an invaluable resource for hunters that provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, game harvest data and regulations, game management unit (GMU) boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines.

## HUNTER ACCESS

Access on private lands for big game hunting opportunities remains limited. Because of 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 2018, WDFW also will facilitate access on Sierra Pacific properties for spring bear, elk, and modern firearm black-tailed deer quality buck permit holders.

Weyerhaeuser-Columbia Timberlands Corporation (Weyerhaeuser) has recently acquired lands formerly owned by Longview Timber throughout western Washington. This includes inholdings in Skagit and Whatcom counties. Weyerhaeuser has converted all of their lands to a fee access management system, wherein hunters apply for and purchase a permit to access Weyerhaeuser property. Walk-in and drive-in permits are sold through their [recreation website \(https://wyrecreation.com\)](https://wyrecreation.com). Maps of their land ownership are available at their website as well.

Because much of the land in District 14 is private property, hunters should obtain permission from landowners to hunt and should be very mindful of where houses, livestock, and outbuildings are situated in relation to the areas where hunting will take place. Portions of District 14 GMUs are under firearm restrictions. Hunters should research landownership and understand firearm limitations prior to hunting.

The Private Lands Access Program has negotiated access for hunters on dozens of private properties throughout Whatcom and Skagit counties. For 2018, WDFW staff members have enrolled two sites for deer and elk general season hunting in GMU 407 and are pursuing more access opportunities. The program currently has 59 sites lined up on private lands for the upcoming waterfowl season (30 in Skagit County and 29 in Whatcom). 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 enrolled in the Hunt by Registration access systems. The use of a Register to Hunt site is very similar to a Feel Free to Hunt site (first-come, first-served), but you must complete a registration card when you use a site. The Register to Hunt program is primarily used to monitor success rates and hunter use at sites where Private Lands staff members have worked to improve habitat. More sites may be added to the program before the season starts. Information on hunting access and these new sites will be available online via the [WDFW Hunter Access webpage](#).

The Hunt by Reservation program offers a quality hunting experience by limiting the number of days a site is hunted while guaranteeing the site will be available to whoever booked the

reservation. To make a reservation for a Hunt by Reservation site, visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage, create an account, choose a hunting site in the Hunt by Reservation category, and book your reservation. Reservations become available two weeks prior to the hunt day, at 8:00 a.m. sharp. A fast internet connection improves your chances of securing a reservation.

Private Lands personnel have worked with landowners to implement food plots at some sites to provide additional forage for waterfowl. 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 on the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage. 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, the WDFW Private Lands program 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

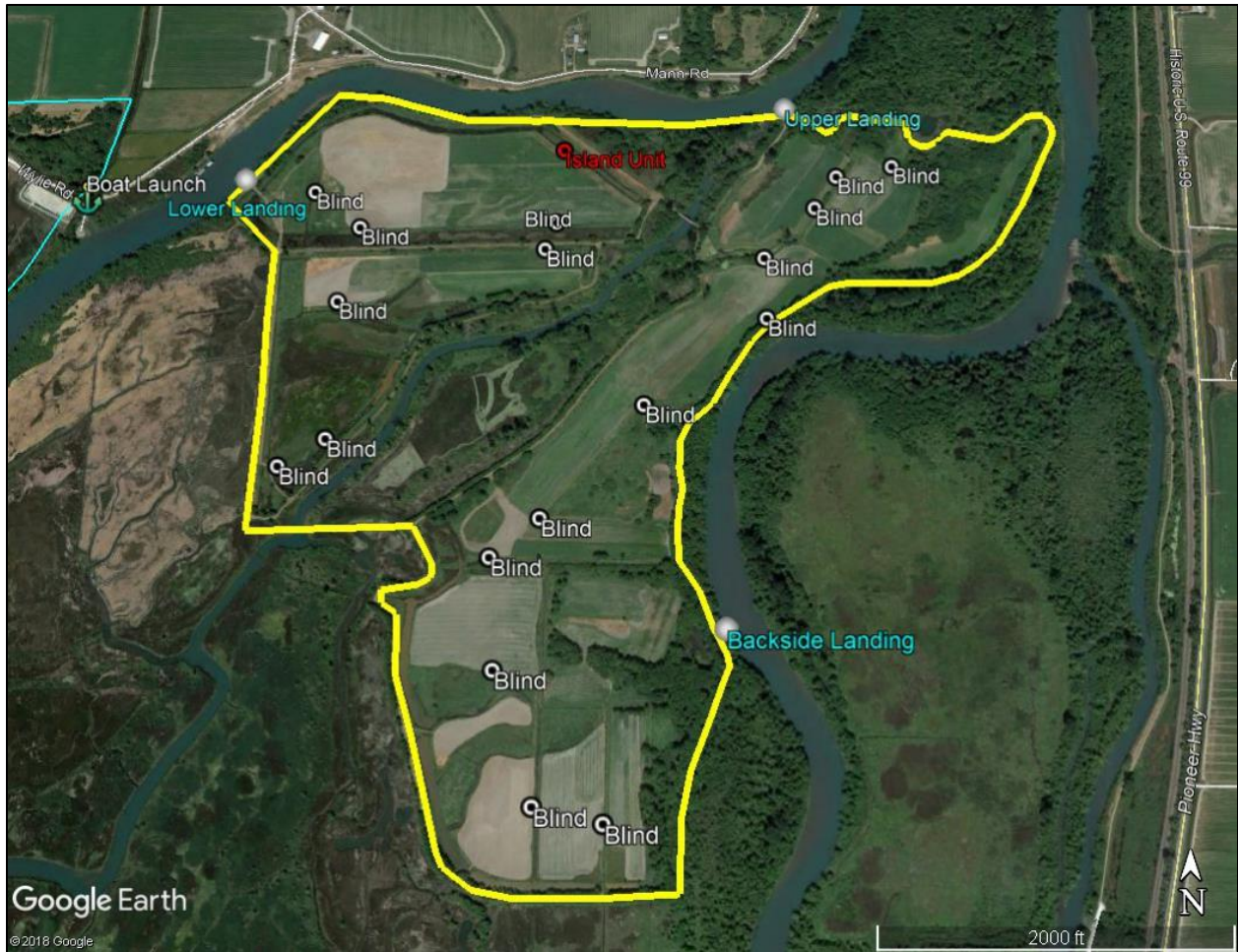
Vehicle access by big game hunters to certain Washington Department of Natural Resource (DNR) lands in Skagit and Whatcom counties may be impacted by logging activities during the upcoming hunting season. Access to the Van Zandt dike and Alger Hill Road via Skarrup Road at Parson Creek Road may be restricted by the DNR to manage access during times of active logging. At the time that this report was prepared, DNR officials indicated partial or full closures may occur for at least a portion of time during the 2018-19 hunting season. Even if potential closures prohibit access by vehicles, hunters are allowed access to these areas on foot, mountain bike, or by horse.

USFS 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. USFS 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 consider the Headquarters, Island, Samish (also known as the Welts property), and Johnson/Debay's Slough units in Skagit County, and Tennant Lake and Lake Terrell wildlife areas in Whatcom County. All of these sites are managed for waterfowl and provide walk-in and/or boat access. Some blinds are also available. Hunters can visit the WDFW webpage, [Introducing Washington's Wildlife Areas](#), and search WDFW wildlife areas and units by name, county, and region for more information on each location.

### ISLAND UNIT

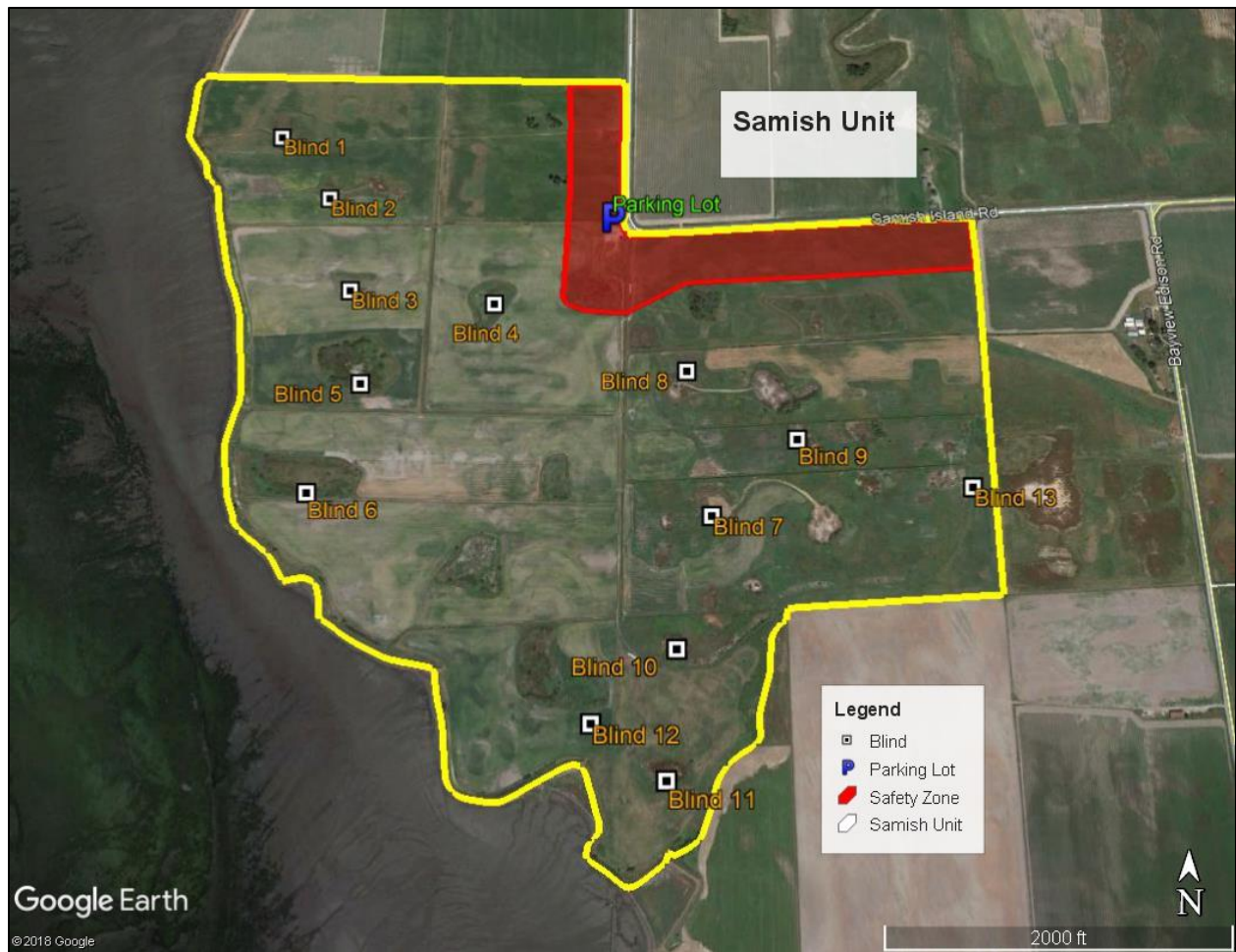
This unit is 250 total acres, and approximately 110 acres are planted to barley, millet, fava beans, and corn left standing for waterfowl forage. Almost 50 percent of these fields are flooded with sheet water using water control structures. This management practice further enhances the area for wintering waterfowl and decoy hunting. The area is a very popular site for waterfowl hunting, even though it is accessible by boat only.



## SAMISH UNIT

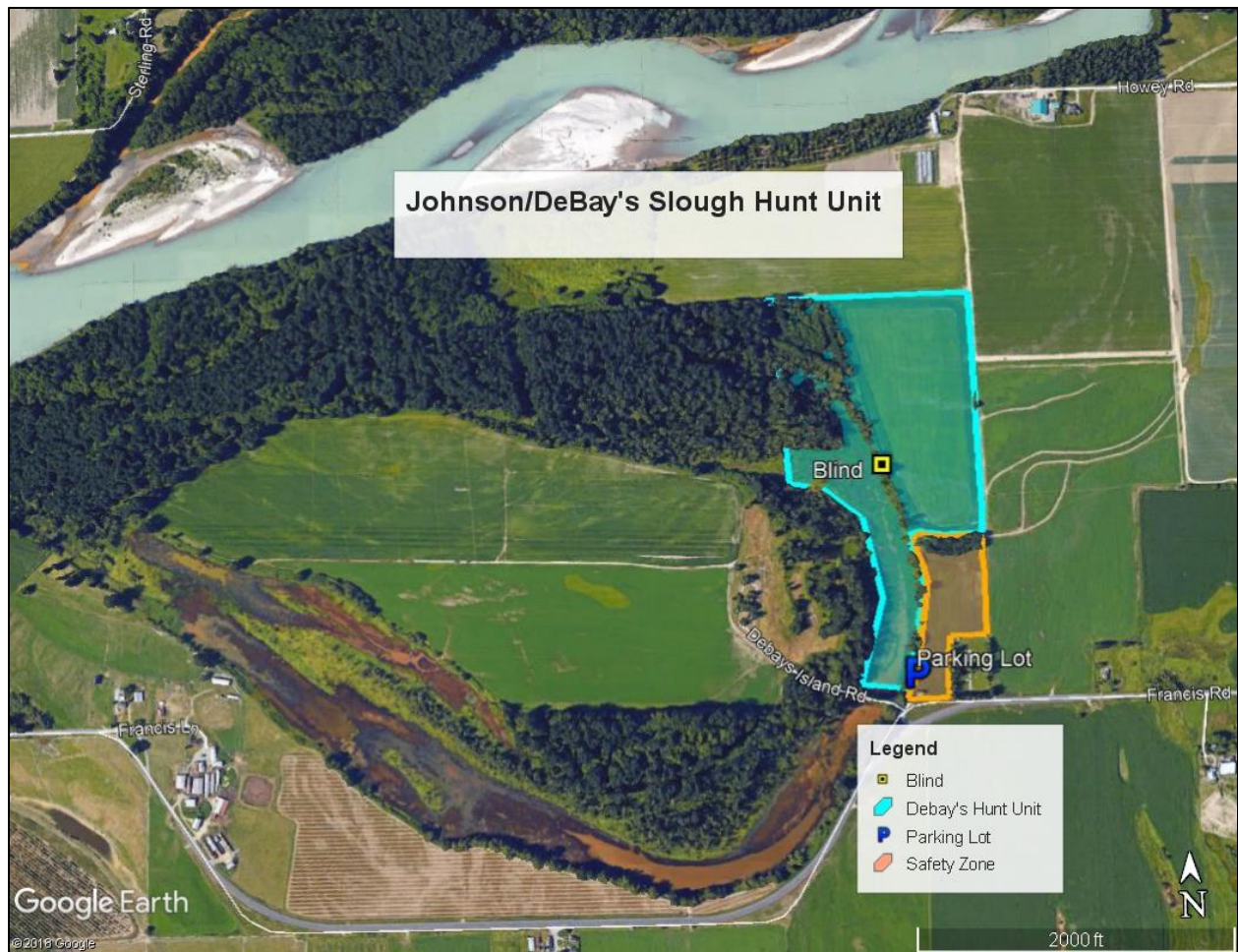
The Samish Unit consists of 410 acres of grass, seasonal wetlands, and agricultural fields. Approximately 193 acres of barley, fava beans, and corn are planted on the site. Funding for the agricultural enhancements on this unit is provided through the Washington State Duck Stamp program. There are 23 shallow ponds and swales, which were developed in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Water control structures also allow a high percentage of the area to be flooded with sheet water during the hunting season. This unit is another very popular site for waterfowl hunting.





## JOHNSON/DEBAY'S SLOUGH HUNT UNIT

The Johnson/Debay's Slough Hunt Unit is 23 acres and can be a very productive hunting site. The unit is planted with a mix of barley and corn depending on the year. The unit is small, and can only accommodate four to five hunting parties. The unit is a field hunting site and should be hunted with decoys.



## SKAGIT BAY ESTUARY

The Skagit Bay estuary starts at the bayfront edge of the delta of the Skagit River (North to South Forks), and it extends south towards Stanwood along the north shore of Camano Island or the South Bay area. A large portion of the first and second class tide lands in this area are owned by WDFW (approximately 16,000 acres), with private ownerships interspersed. The property provides prime waterfowl hunting from a boat or by foot during low tides. WDFW manages two game reserves in this area, Skagit Bay Delta and Fir Island Farm reserves.

The Skagit Bay topography is quite diverse, and includes open saltwater, mud flats, low marsh (grass), and a high marsh of cattails, brush, and taller woody vegetation. The entire area is a maze of channels, cut by both tidal action and currents from the various sloughs of the Skagit River delta. Most bay front hunters set up on the edge of the vegetation line, and in the higher marsh, channels, and backwaters. Some prefer to hunt the open water on Skagit Bay.

The entire bay front can offer good shooting, but the most heavily used sites are on the South and North Forks of the Skagit River, downstream from the more popular boat launch access areas.

