

2019

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**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



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2019 DISTRICT 14 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Skagit & Whatcom Counties

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DISTRICT 14 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 14 is made up of Skagit and Whatcom Counties, the two most northwestern counties in 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 primary river systems in the district. Lower elevation forested uplands within the Skagit and Nooksack watersheds are owned 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. The Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and North Cascades National Park manage the higher elevation forest lands within the district (hunting is allowed in the Ross Lake National Recreation Area). These federal lands are associated with the North Cascade Mountains and support game species such as mountain goat, black bear, and black-tailed deer.



Photo credit: Robert Waddell

From north to south, the core game management units (GMUs) that make up 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 (Figure 1).

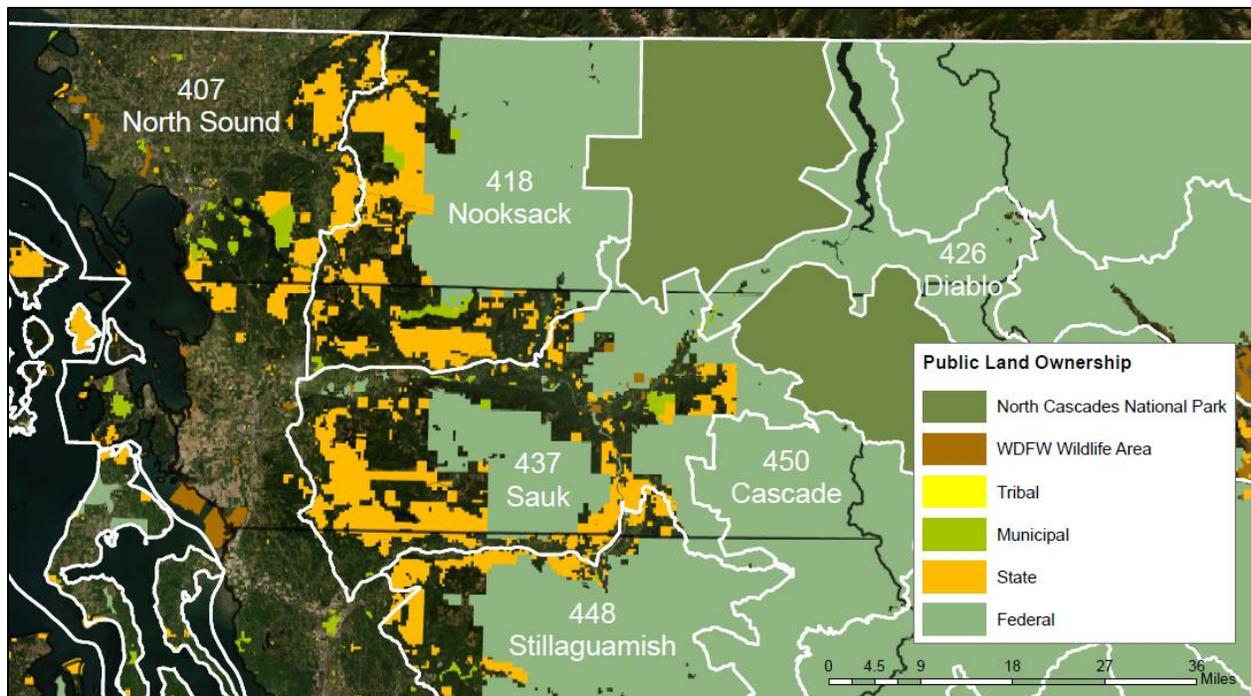


Figure 1. Game management units in Skagit and Whatcom counties

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

- Both saltwater and inland waterfowl hunting opportunities with the highest harvest of ducks and geese in western Washington. Statewide it boasts the second highest duck and the fourth highest goose harvest.
- Very diverse waterfowl hunting opportunities, including lesser snow geese, Canada geese, Pacific black 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/or forest grouse.
- Special permit only, quality bull elk hunts within the 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.
- A unique opportunity to hunt black bear in GMU 418 during the spring, with access to extensive land behind private gates where hunters don't otherwise disturb bears.

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 2019 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 any native upland game bird populations and is not managed for these species. Pheasants Forever and WDFW will continue to implement a pen-raised pheasant release program in Skagit and Whatcom counties in 2019 – 2020. Other game birds that WDFW manages collectively as forest grouse include the ruffed, dusky, and sooty grouse. Dusky and sooty grouse (formerly referred to as blue grouse) occur in District 14 and continue to have a lengthy season from Sept. 1 – Dec. 31. A daily bag limit of four of any species and no more than three of one species is still the same as previous years.

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. Changes this year include a decrease to a 1-bird daily bag limit for Northern Pintail. This is a nationwide change in response to population estimates below established thresholds. Within the district, hunting of lesser snow geese, Pacific brant, and sea ducks (e.g., Harlequin, scoter, long-tailed, and goldeneye) requires hunters to apply for and have a special migratory bird authorization while hunting and submit a harvest report card by March 20, 2020, even if they did not harvest any birds. Hunters should reference the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons booklet](#) for more information about the requirements to hunt these species.

ELK

The North Cascades (Nooksack) elk herd continues to grow and expand into areas of formerly unoccupied habitat, including agricultural areas where elk may damage crops and farming infrastructure. Based on the post-hunt survey done in spring 2019, the total population size of the North Cascades herd is approximately 1,500 animals. The 2019 survey showed a bull-to-cow ratio of 21 bulls per 100 cows, just above the WDFW objective of 12–20 bulls per 100 cows. The calf-to-cow ratio was estimated at 37 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 WDFW population goal of approximately 2,000 elk has not been met. Since WDFW started a very limited hunt of this 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.

Elk hunting opportunities for 2019 are generally restricted to special permit hunts in GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941 (which is within GMU 437). A total of 44 any bull permits have been allocated (26 permits in GMU 418 and 18 permits in GMU 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 allowed in previous years. The WDFW Private Lands Access program partners with Sierra Pacific Industries to provide access to their properties within GMU 418 for all elk special permit holders who draw a tag for GMU 418. Information about access to these lands will be given to permit holders before the 2019 hunts.

In Elk Area 4941, 28 more permit opportunities for antlerless elk are available for Master Hunters and youth, senior, and hunters with disabilities during the 2019 season. 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 given more information about the hunt area before the 2019 hunts.



Photo credit: Rob Cogdal

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 may push elk into nearby GMUs that remain closed to general harvest. GMU 407 tends to have greater numbers of elk, but access to private property typically is key to getting a real opportunity. Hunters seeking public lands opportunities for these general season elk hunts should visit the [WDFW Hunt Regulations Webmap](#) for more information.

The public area most likely to yield success for hunters in GMU 407 is the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Van Zandt Dike property northeast of Acme. Though hunting pressure may be high, hunters who scout, do their homework, and hunt away from roads are more likely to harvest an animal. When hunting Van Zandt Dike, hunters should be aware of the DNR property boundary and not cross onto private property (without permission) or into GMU 418.

The North Cascades elk herd offers one of the premier bull elk hunting opportunities in western Washington. Archery, muzzleloader, and modern firearm hunters that are fortunate enough to draw a permit have the chance to harvest a bull elk with an “any bull” only tag in GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941. The harvest success rate since 2007 has been high (58–93%) for all three hunt method types combined due to limited hunting pressure and lengthy seasons. In 2018, the harvest success rate in GMU 418 was 58%, with 15 of 26 permit holders harvesting a bull elk. In Elk Area 4941, 12 of 16 permit holders harvested a bull elk for a 75% success rate.

Youth hunters, hunters 65 and older, and hunters with disabilities that draw tags in Elk Area 4941 can harvest an antlerless elk. In 2018, eight of 16 permit holders harvested a cow elk for a 50% success rate.

Changes to the 2019 hunting regulations specific to the North Cascades elk herd include:

- Increase in bull elk permits in Elk Area 4941 (from 16 in 2018 to 18 in 2019)
- Increased opportunities for antlerless elk harvest by youth hunters, hunters with disabilities, and hunters age 65 or older in Elk Area 4941, from 12 permits in 2018 to 15 in 2019.

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 [Hunt Regulations Webmap](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's 2019–2020 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the Webmap shows public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

DEER

WDFW is not conducting black-tailed deer surveys in District 14, primarily 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). In contrast, portions of GMU 407 (North Sound), the most urbanized GMU in the district, have quite high local deer densities, which have been damaging some private property.



Photo credit: Greg Green

A total of 934 deer were reported harvested during the 2018 general season in District 14 GMUs, representing a 26% increase in harvest compared to the 2017 season harvest of 739. From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 provides the best opportunity for successfully harvesting a deer in District 14. In 2018, hunters harvested 571 deer in GMU 407 during the general season hunts, an increase from the 2017 harvest of 469 deer. The next best option for hunters is GMU 437, with 246 deer harvested in 2018. The combined general season deer harvest within the other GMUs in the district (418 and 426), was 117 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 and take advantage of it. The key to a successful harvest in GMU 407 is securing permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area before the hunting season. Hunters who intend to hunt deer in developed areas should read page 96 of [Washington's 2019 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations](#) booklet and check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions.

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 a chance to hunt a quality buck during the rut (Nov. 1–13; GMU 426 is open from Nov. 1–18). Hunter success rates during the 2018 season were 44% (GMU 418), 24% (GMU 437), and 20% (GMU 426) for hunters who participated. Sixty tags were issued, and hunters reported harvesting a total of 19 bucks, 11 of which in GMU 418.

WDFW was able to negotiate access to Sierra Pacific properties for six of the 25 permit holders in GMU 418 during the 2018 season and will provide the same opportunity for 2019 hunters. Hunters who draw a quality buck tag for GMU 418 will receive details by mail about how to be included in a lottery-style drawing for one of six available chances to win access to Sierra Pacific properties in the GMU.

For those seeking a more remote and rugged trophy black-tailed deer hunting experience, areas within GMUs 418, 426, and 437 are open for High Buck Hunts from Sept. 15–25. These areas are accessed by using United States Forest Service roads and trail systems. High elevation areas in the Mount Baker, Pasayten, and Glacier Peak Wilderness Areas are open for the high buck hunt.

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting are available online at [Game Harvest Reports](#). Within District 14, some hunting opportunities exist on private industrial timberlands and property managed by the Washington DNR, although these areas are mostly 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.

Deer hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Regulations Webmap](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. The Webmap shows public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

BEAR

Black bears are common in District 14, though a formal estimate of the district's bear population is unavailable. Throughout the state, black bears live in a diverse array of forested habitats, from coastal rainforests to the dry woodlands of the Cascades' eastern slopes. In general, black bears are strongly associated with forest cover, but they do occasionally use open country, such as clear cuts and the fringes of other open habitats.



Photo credit: Greg Green

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 2018 in GMUs 407, 418, 426, and 437 was comparable to the number of bears harvested during the 2017 season. Of nearly 1,400 hunters, 119 bears were harvested in these GMUs during the fall, with more than half harvested in GMU 418 (11% success rate).

District 14 hunters that choose to hunt in GMUs 418 and 426 will be hunting in a grizzly bear recovery area that WDFW identified. Before hunting, hunters must complete the annual WDFW online bear identification test and pass with a score of at least 80%. While hunting, hunters must carry proof they passed this test or an equivalent test from another state.



Photo credit: Keegun Zitkovich

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

GMU 418 is one of the few western Washington GMUs, and the only GMU in District 14, where WDFW promotes a spring bear hunt to address damage caused by bears peeling young trees (primarily Douglas fir) on commercially managed forest lands. WDFW manages a hunter access program that coordinates access for this small pool of hunters to areas behind private gates where bears are otherwise not disturbed by hunters. In the spring of 2019, eight 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 27%. WDFW will announce special permit hunts for the 2020 spring season in late fall 2019, and the submission period for applications will be Jan. 2 – Feb. 28, 2020.

COUGAR

In District 14 it is most common for hunters to harvest a cougar while pursuing other game rather than specifically targeting cougars. A hunter who wants to harvest a cougar must have a valid big game license, which includes the cougar species option, before harvesting a cat. It is illegal statewide to use dogs to recreationally pursue and harvest cougars. Hunters may harvest cougars during the early (Sept. 1 – Dec. 31) and late (Jan. 1 – April 30) season.

Hunters should note that most GMUs in District 14, except for GMU 407, have a cougar harvest guideline. GMUs 418, 426, and 437 have a harvest guideline of 11 to 15 animals and GMUs 448 and 450 have a harvest guideline of 10 to 13 animals. In those GMUs covered under a harvest guideline, WDFW may close the late hunting season after Jan. 1 if cougar harvest, to that point, meets or exceeds the guideline. During the late season, cougar hunters may hunt cougar from Jan. 1 until the hunt area harvest guideline has been met and the GMU is closed by WDFW, or until the end of the season (April 30), whichever occurs first. It is the 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 Jan. 1, 2020. During the 2018–19 season, the cougar harvest did not exceed the guideline and the units remained open throughout the season.

Hunters should remember that a 2019 hunting license is good from April 1, 2019 – March 31, 2020. Thus, a hunter wishing to hunt cougar in April 2020 will need to buy a 2020 hunting license/cougar tag (WAC 220-415-100). All successful cougar hunters must report cougar harvest to the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) within 72 hours of harvest and must contact a WDFW office to arrange to have the pelt sealed within five days of harvest. Hunters must also report their harvest in the WILD system.

MOUNTAIN GOAT



Photo credit: Greg Green

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 should scout the available units thoroughly to see if they are up to the challenge before applying for a hunt.

WDFW issued six special permits in 2019 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% or greater in any year, and Mount Baker has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. In 2018, four out of six permit holders were successful, with two hunters harvesting females.

WDFW strongly encourages hunters to not shoot female goats, or nannies. Although permit holders can legally take nannies, mountain goats are slow to reach sexual maturity and have a slow production rate, thus they are very sensitive to losing adult females. Beginning in 2018, mountain goat hunt applicants drawn for a permit may only buy 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 of harvest 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 BIRDS

Upland bird opportunities available to hunters within District 14 include ring-neck pheasant, sooty grouse, ruffed grouse, California quail, turkey, and Eurasian and band-tailed pigeons. Although these species have some similarities, each is different in some ways that are important to hunters, from their size, coloration, and habitat requirements to their abundance and distribution in Washington and to the best techniques for hunting them. In most years since 2010, harvest of mourning dove and (California) quail have occurred in both Skagit and Whatcom counties. However, the average total harvest is approximately 175 mourning doves and 42 quail per year and varies greatly based on hunter participation. The few turkeys occasionally reported to WDFW in the region are a result of accidental escape or intentional release by private parties. With such small and scattered populations of upland game birds, fluctuations of their population dynamics are challenging to estimate. Similarly, 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](#), 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 give additional upland bird hunting opportunity in areas that cannot sustain naturally reproducing populations due to our cool, wet climate and lack of grain farming. This program encourages participation from new, young, and seasoned hunters. Approximately 35,000 to 40,000 pheasants are released each year at roughly 25 sites throughout western Washington.

Pheasant releases will occur on four sites in District 14 this fall. In Skagit County, WDFW will release pheasants twice at the Samish Unit, once before the youth hunt (Sept. 21–22) and the other before the senior hunt (Sept. 23–27). No releases will occur after the senior hunt because the unit is managed and used primarily for waterfowl hunting. Hunters may pursue the remaining on-site pheasants until the opening of the statewide waterfowl season (Oct. 21), but will be

closed after this to minimize conflicts between pheasant and waterfowl hunters. The remaining three pheasant release sites in District 14 are in Whatcom County at 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, WDFW will release between 30 and 65 birds three or more times each week, mainly on weekends.



Photo Credit: Ryan Askren

In District 14, pheasant hunters must buy a western Washington pheasant license to hunt pheasants, however, a small game license is not required. To hunt pheasants and other upland birds all hunters must wear a minimum of 400 square inches hunter orange or fluorescent hunter pink clothing. Additionally, it is illegal to use or have toxic lead shot on all pheasant release sites. For information on additional requirements please refer to the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons Pamphlet](#). Pheasant hunters should also check the [Western Washington Pheasant Release Program](#) 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. Ruffed grouse are the most widespread species of grouse in this district and throughout the state. They are most abundant in lowland coniferous and deciduous forests under 2,000 feet of elevation. Prospects for ruffed grouse this season are higher than usual, mainly due to the warm and dry spring. These factors increase both grouse brood production and survival, which in turn increases the number of birds available on the landscape.

Prospects for harvesting sooty grouse are also above average this season for similar reasons. Hunters can increase their chances of success by climbing to higher elevation sites. The greatest success likely will occur along trails and ridgelines above 2,000–3,000 feet within Pacific silver fir and noble fir forest stands that host berry-bearing plants like huckleberry, grouse whortleberry, and other species.

TURKEY

Wild turkeys are still uncommon in District 14, with no predictable concentrations. Consequently, harvest prospects for this species remain very low even with significant hunter effort. In 2018, hunters only harvested three turkeys in District 14’s three primary GMUs (407, 418, and 437). Furthermore, since harvest is reported at the GMU level, and GMUs 407 and 437 overlap with an adjacent district, harvest of these birds may have occurred outside the area.

Hunters must get and carry a small game license and a turkey transport tag on their person while hunting for or transporting a turkey. Only male turkeys or turkeys with visible beards may be harvested, and turkey hunters must report for each turkey transport tag purchased by Jan. 31, 2020. Hunters can submit reports online using the WDFW Licensing System or by telephone (1-877-945-3492). Hunters who harvest an animal should submit a report within 10 days of harvest.

EURASIAN COLLARED DOVE

Eurasian collared doves are an exotic species (i.e., a species living outside its native distributional range) and are becoming increasingly common throughout District 14. Locally, this species appears to be growing in size and expanding its distribution, which includes both agricultural areas and, surprisingly, urban neighborhoods as well. Due to its non-native status, hunters may pursue this species year-round. Hunters should scout and seek landowner permission in lowland agricultural areas with barnyard settings.

Additionally, hunters should be able to correctly identify Eurasian collared doves from mourning doves as they can often confuse inexperienced birders/hunters. Eurasian collared doves are much larger than mourning doves, but size can be difficult to gauge when only one species is present. Identification is especially crucial when hunting Eurasian collared doves outside of the mourning dove season, which runs Sept. 1– Oct. 30.



Only a small game or big game license is required to hunt Eurasian collared doves. As for all hunting activities, hunters should confirm the area they plan to hunt has no firearm restrictions and be mindful of people, buildings, farm equipment, or power lines while hunting.

BAND-TAILED PIGEON

Band-tailed pigeons are the largest of Washington's pigeons and doves and are native to the state. Harvest trends for this species have been declining for quite some time and is likely linked to a decrease in hunter interest/participation.

District biologists performed three, single-day surveys in July 2019 at historic mineral sites in Skagit and Whatcom counties to monitor changes in the local breeding population. Data from these surveys suggest that the number of locally breeding band-tailed pigeons declined. These surveys allow biologists to anticipate trends in the regional population. However, the open season (Sept. 15–23) may correspond with fall migration, when northern birds move into this area, making predictions on hunting prospects of this species more complex.

A small game license, state migratory bird permit, and migratory bird authorization card are 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 will increase your chances of success.

WATERFOWL

YOUTH HUNT DATES: Open species include Canada geese, white-fronted geese, ducks (including Scaup), and coots (does not include white geese, brant, or snipe). Youth hunts will be held Sept. 21, 2019 in western Washington, and Sept. 28, 2019 in eastern Washington. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt.

****NEW** COMBINED YOUTH, VETERANS & ACTIVE MILITARY HUNT DAY:** Open species include Canada geese, white-fronted geese, white geese, brant, ducks (including Scaup), and coots. These hunts will be held statewide Feb. 1, 2020. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt.

DABBLING DUCKS

More waterfowl are harvested in Region 4 (North Puget Sound) than any other region in the state, with District 14 providing some of the best waterfowl hunting opportunities in the region. During the 2018 season, Skagit County was the state's second best duck producing county (following Grant County), with a harvest of 47,553 birds, which is down 7% from the five year average, but is likely attributed to a 9% decrease in hunter participation and not overall duck

numbers. The 2018 duck harvest for neighboring Whatcom County was 17,359 birds, down an unfortunate 37% from the five year average, which could also be credited to the 19% decline in hunter participation.

Despite low winter precipitation and a very dry and warm spring which left many of Washington's breeding areas dry, breeding survey counts produced a surprisingly higher number of breeding birds than anticipated. Additionally, reports from breeding sites important to this area show average water levels in breeding ponds, which should make for a decent year of brood production.

Early season hunting opportunities in District 14 are more successful on the saltwater marshes. On opening day, hunters can expect a mixed bag of species, which may include blue-winged teal and wood duck, since they do not typically leave for their southern wintering grounds until later in the season. Large numbers of northern breeding ducks start arriving in late October and November. Bag and possession limits for Northern pintail have been decreased from last year's two (2)-bird daily limit to a one (1)-bird daily limit. This change was made nationwide and is in response to lower than average population estimates. Although the district supports a large population of Northern pintail, this is not typical in many other areas.

Please be sure to get authorizations and harvest record cards required for the species/areas you are pursuing waterfowl (see page 6 of the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons Regulations](#)). Authorizations and harvest record cards are available at WDFW license dealers or online at fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov. Hunters must select each of the required harvest record cards for species they intend to hunt.

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. Hunters are also encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunting Access](#) webpage and [Hunt Regulations Webmap](#). The Webmap is a tool that provides information on Washington's 2019–2020 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the Webmap shows public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

SEA DUCKS

For those pursuing intertidal and saltwater hunting for sea ducks, boat ramps are at Conway, the Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters Unit on Freshwater Slough, or under the twin bridges over the Swinomish Channel on Highway 20. Boat access can greatly improve hunting options and success. Please be sure to have all necessary safety equipment aboard.



Photo credit: Ryan Askren

Like some dabbling ducks, all sea ducks have their own species-specific daily bag limit which can make up the total seven-bird bag limit. In western Washington, the daily bag limit is one Harlequin (only one Harlequin may be taken per season), two scoter, two long-tailed duck, and two goldeneye. See [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons Regulations](#) for more details.

Additionally, the three major bays in Skagit County (Samish, Padilla, and Skagit) feature a majority of pintails, wigeon, and mallards. Both private and public uplands in Skagit and Whatcom counties have great food resources which provide good forage and ultimately attract and hold dabbling ducks when harsh winter conditions arrive.

BLACK BRANT

Skagit County has a historic and well-known tradition of black brant hunting. 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. To prevent over harvest, aerial surveys of the wintering population are flown to determine a population estimate. In the past, this estimate dictated whether there was a eight day season (more than 6,000 birds estimated by survey), three day season (between 3,000-6,000 birds), or no season at all (under 3,000 birds). This year a guaranteed two-day

season for Skagit County has been established and will take place Jan. 11–12. Additional season dates may occur, but will be dependent on aerial survey results. WDFW will send a news release with season updates. Hunters can subscribe to the WDFW email mailing list to receive news releases and other department information by visiting: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/lists>.

The three-day brant season in Whatcom County in 2019 was successful with an estimate between 41–58 birds harvested and will be continued in Jan. 2020. This year's season will take place on Jan. 11, 15, and 18, with a bag limit of two per day, and a possession limit of six.

A special migratory bird authorization card is required to hunt both brant, so please be sure to acquire all necessary documentation prior to heading afield. Lastly, the mandatory harvest reporting deadline for brant is March 20, 2020. Data from these reports are important for managing this species.

CANADA GEESE

Skagit County bodes the fourth highest Canada goose harvest in all of Washington, and the highest harvest west of the Cascades. This year, the September Canada goose season takes place Sept. 7–12, and offers early season hunting opportunities for hunters in both Skagit (Goose Management Area 1) and Whatcom (Goose Management Area 3). During this early season, bag limits are five per day, with a possession limit of 15. The higher limits are because early seasons typically try to target and decrease the population of local resident birds, while later seasons will see an influx of migrant geese.

Regular goose season dates are different for Skagit and Whatcom counties and are based on their respective Goose Management Zone (see page 6 of the [Washington State Migratory Waterfowl & Upland Game Seasons Regulations](#)). Possession bag limits during this season decrease to 12 birds.



Photo credit: Ryan Valentine

LESSER SNOW GEESE

Snow goose hunting is another mainstay of waterfowl hunting in District 14 and is an alternative to hunting dabbling ducks. The liberal bag limit of six white geese per day reflects a healthy and stable population, which is evaluated using data collected on the breeding grounds and during wintering aerial surveys of the Skagit-Fraser River Delta.

Harvest of snow geese from the Washington population was up in the 2018 season. This isn't surprising as estimates from aerial winter surveys flown by WDFW staff in January and February of 2019 reflected an increasing trend in the local population and number of flocks present within the survey area. White geese are adapting to the changing land use and crop conditions in Skagit County, which has had an impact on their overall distribution. Harvest is expected to continue increasing this year as human-geese conflict, particularly in agricultural areas, and available hunter opportunity continues to grow.



Photo credit: Callie Moore



Photo credit: Callie Moore

Hunters interested in harvesting snow geese should try to gain access to multiple properties before the season. Early season is the best time to lure geese, particularly juveniles, with decoys. In this area, flocks tend to stay within a several mile radius, but will not necessarily return to the same field they were feeding in the previous day. Due to their large numbers and aggressive feeding, they may exhaust a food source very quickly. During the beginning of the hunting season, hunting in corn stubble is a popular technique. As the season progresses, snow goose diets diversify, and geese begin to feed 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 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 will follow the same season structure for white geese (Lesser Snow, Ross', and Blue Geese) in Goose Management Area 1 (Skagit and Snohomish Counties). The 2019–20 season will include a late hunting season for white goose only from Feb. 8–18, 2020. There will be one closure during the season from Dec. 2–13, to allow for the February hunt. All normal regulations of plugged shotguns, non-motorized decoys, and bag limits apply. This late season will extend the waterfowl hunting opportunity in Skagit and Snohomish counties (only the portion west of Interstate 5) well past the typical 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 Regulations](#)). The bag limit for white geese is six birds, with a possession limit of 18. The WDFW Private Lands Access program partners 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 and [Hunt Regulations Webmap](#). The Webmap is a tool that provides information on Washington's 2019–2020 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the Webmap shows public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

Swans Are Protected - Closed Statewide



Swan, Tundra or Trumpeter
(White adult, Protected Species)



Swan, Cygnet
(Grey juvenile, Protected Species)

Drawings courtesy of Ducks Unlimited

HUNTER ACCESS

Access on private lands for big game hunting opportunities is 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 when walk-in access is allowed.

One exception to this is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns significant private industrial timber lands in Skagit and Whatcom counties. For 2019, WDFW also will facilitate access on Sierra Pacific properties in GMU 418 for spring bear, special permit bull elk, and some quality black-tailed 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 their lands to a fee access management system, wherein hunters apply for and buy a permit to access Weyerhaeuser property. Walk-in and drive-in permits are sold through their [recreation website](#). 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 get 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 2019, WDFW staff members have enrolled several sites for deer and elk general season hunting in GMU 407 and are pursuing more access opportunities. The program currently has over 55 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 Register to Hunt (i.e., sites are first-come, first-served), several will be enrolled in the Hunt by Reservation system. 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. 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 Hunting 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 whomever 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 [Places to go hunting](#) 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 as part of the 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. Even if potential closures prohibit access by vehicles, hunters can access these areas on foot, mountain bike, or by horse.

USFS lands offer some vehicular access throughout Whatcom and Skagit counties. Many road systems have 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. 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, [Wildlife Areas](#), and search WDFW wildlife areas and units by name, county, and region for more information on each location.

ISLAND UNIT

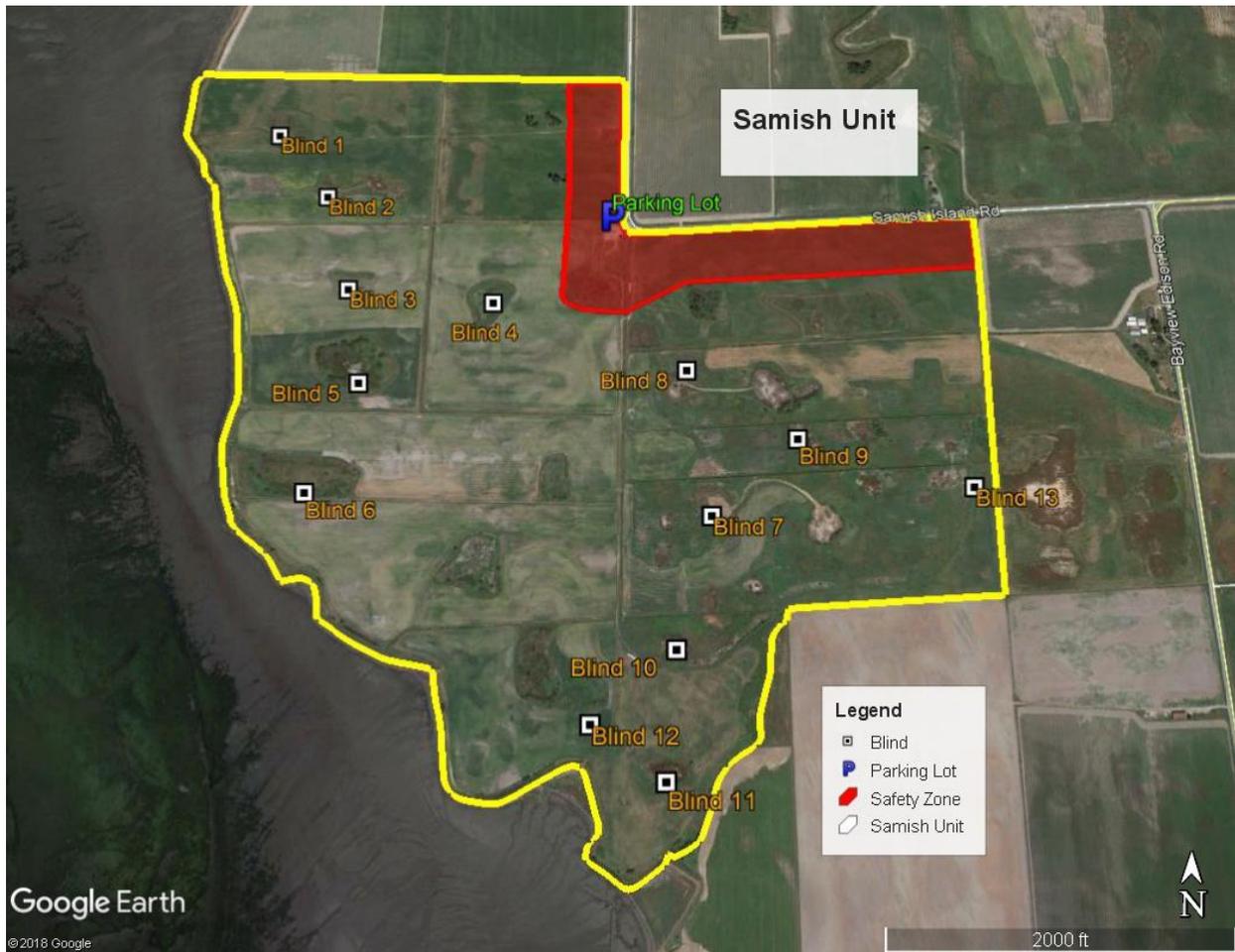
This unit is 250 total acres, and approximately 110 acres are planted barley, millet, fava beans, and corn left standing for waterfowl forage. Almost 50% of these fields are flooded with sheet water using water control structures. This management practice further enhances the area for wintering waterfowl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



Island Unit

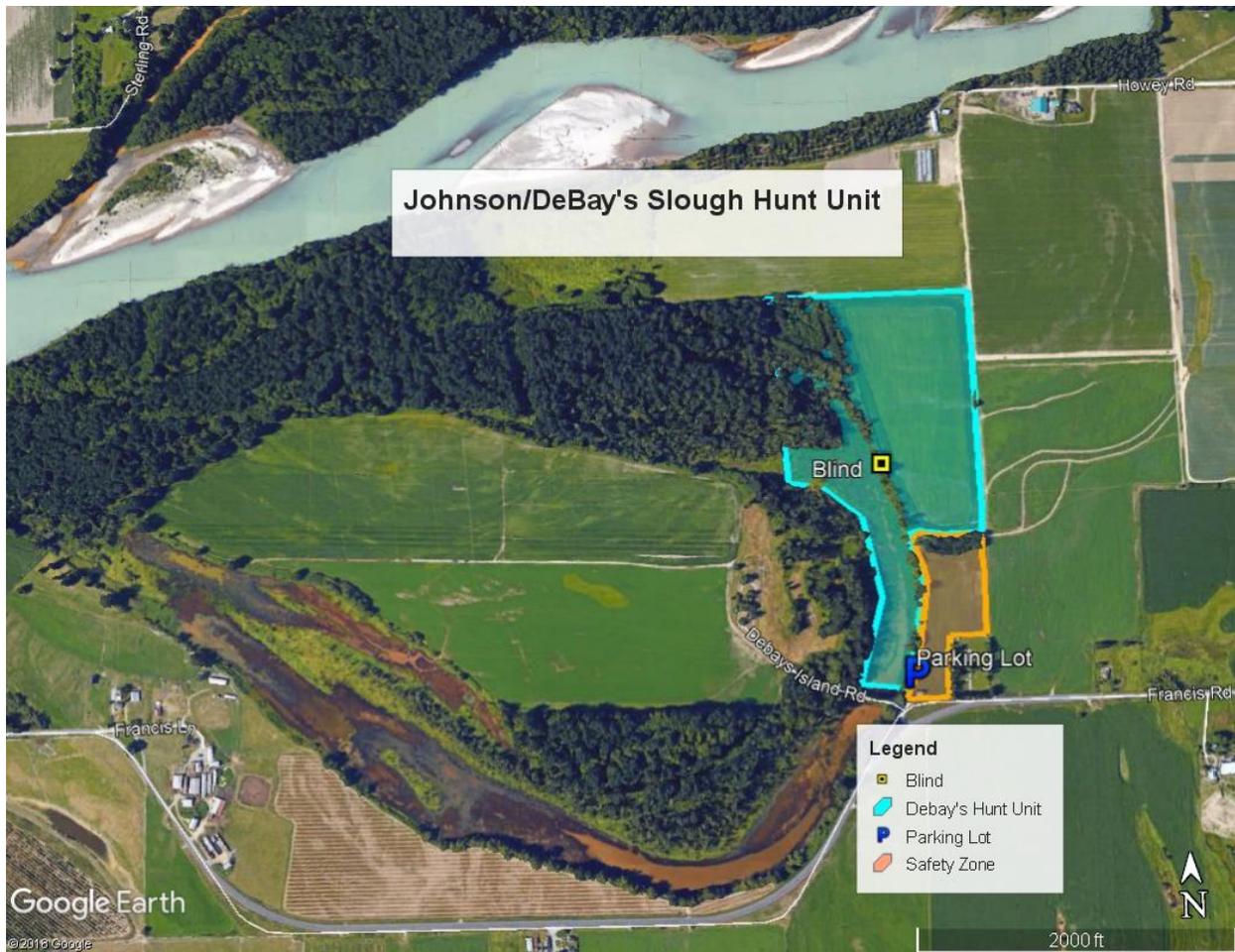
SAMISH UNIT

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 extends south toward Stanwood along the north shore of Camano Island or the South Bay area. WDFW owns a large portion of the first and second class tide lands in this area (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.



Photo credit: Robert Waddell

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.

