DISTRICT 4 HUNTING PROSPECTS
Benton and Franklin counties
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DISTRICT 4 GENERAL OVERVIEW

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

Several of Washington’s major rivers occur in District 4. The Hanford Reach of the Columbia River runs between Benton and Franklin counties. This 50-mile stretch is one of the most scenic segments of the Columbia in Washington. The Snake and Palouse rivers delineate the eastern boundary of Franklin County. Near the heart of District 4 is the confluence of the Yakima, Snake, and Walla Walla rivers with the main stem of the Columbia River at Tri-Cities (Pasco, Kennewick, and Richland). Large populations of waterfowl congregate throughout the district for breeding, migrating, and wintering, despite the fact that this is the driest part of Washington, with only six to nine inches of precipitation per year. While a mostly tree-less landscape dominates, riparian and shrub-steppe vegetation provide habitat and cover for game birds, and the breaks along the Snake and Palouse rivers are favored by wintering mule deer. The Rattlesnake Hills elk population is centered on the access-restricted Hanford Site and Hanford Reach National Monument, though lucky hunters may find small groups scattered across the district.
Upland habitats are part of the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion, historically dominated by native shrubsteppe. Since the 1800s, farmers and ranchers have been working the land around District 4. Intensive irrigated agriculture supporting many crops, orchards, and vineyards is a major land use in the Yakima River Valley, southern Benton County, and western Franklin County. Dryland wheat is dominant in central Benton County and eastern Franklin County. Many thousands of acres of this wheat country have been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Program (SAFE), providing cover for mule deer and other wildlife that have lost much of their natural shrubsteppe habitat. Fires are currently the largest threat to remaining habitat patches and are frequently human caused. Invasive cheat grass has created a flammable carpet throughout the shrubsteppe, often facilitating large and fast fires. Sagebrush takes decades to return post-fire, so please be careful and fire-wise.

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

Hunting access in District 4 is more limited than some other parts of the state, as much of the district is in private ownership or on federal properties closed to hunting. However, quality opportunities do exist, and WDFW is always trying to expand hunting access. Information and related links to several public sites listed in each game section can be found in the Major Public Lands section. Information on how to access private land through one of WDFW’s access programs is available in the Private Lands section and on the WDFW website.

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

**ELK**

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

Typically, during general hunting seasons ~200 hunters report that they pursue elk in District 4. Of those, 20-30 are usually successful. Last year, hunters reported a harvest of 51 elk during general seasons, for a success rate of ~21 percent, which is well above the statewide average. Harvest success usually depends upon private land access, forage conditions on the Hanford site, and the availability of forage crops on farmlands outside of the protected area. Hunters are usually more successful early in the season. While most of the land around the Hanford Monument is private, elk hunters can pursue elk in Benton County on WDFW’s Thornton and Rattlesnake Slope units of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area north of Prosser and Benton City.

The Blackrock Ranches and Silver Dollar special permit hunts offer a chance to hunt Hanford elk on private land. If selected, permit holders are guaranteed a 1-day guided hunt. There are several permits for youth and hunters with disabilities, plus a Quality Elk permit and Antlerless Permit open to any hunter. See the current hunting regulations for more information.

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

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU or permit hunt are online.
DEER

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

In 2018, the hunter success rate during the general seasons for deer across all weapons in District 4 was 29 percent, equal to the five-year average of 29 percent. Statewide average hunter success was 26 percent. District 4 hunters generally enjoy a high success rate primarily due to restricted hunter numbers on private land and a lack of cover for deer.

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

There were some changes in 2018 affecting deer hunts in the Kahlotus Unit. Hunters should look for “Washtucna” hunts in the pamphlet that include GMU 381-Kahlotus along with three adjacent GMUs (Figure 3). These replace many of the Kahlotus hunts offered previously. Also,
the late muzzleloader general season only allows harvest of bucks 3-point or better, and no longer includes antlerless mule deer. These changes reflect efforts to manage these deer as a population, and we hope to give hunters flexibility to hunt in units where the migratory deer are during different times of the season. It should help reduce heavy pressure on some sections of the wintering grounds and provide harvest that is more consistent across the GMUs that support this population. Washtucna permits include late muzzleloader antlerless, modern antlerless, plus youth, disabled, and senior permits. The number of these permits are allocated annually based on deer abundance estimates.

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

Post-hunt surveys in December 2018 yielded an estimated 20 bucks to 100 does in GMU 381 (Figure 4), which is within the management goal for the population. This includes non-legal bucks (spike and 2 point). High hunter success and low buck escapement in the open country where this population lives can contribute to challenges locating legal bucks. Fawn numbers were at 68 fawns per 100 does (Figure 4), above the 10-year average of 60 fawns per 100 does.
Figure 4. Buck and fawn ratios per 100 does in District 4 based on post-hunt road surveys.

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

In northern Benton County (Rattlesnake Hills - GMU 372), spend some time scouting for deer in the Thornton and Rattlesnake units of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area (Figure 12). There are also some Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) parcels available. Be sure to know what land you are on and avoid trespassing on private property, including when navigating property corners and retrieving game.
In southern Benton County (Horse Heaven Hills - GMU 373), there are deer on BLM land in the Horse Heaven Hills, scattered tracts of DNR, and private property within WDFW access programs.

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

There are many properties where hunters can gain access to deer through one of WDFW’s private land access programs. Preseason scouting is advisable in order to learn where to hunt and obtain permission from private landowners. WDFW’s Hunting Regulations Webmap (select your species, then be sure PHLO is checked) and Private Lands website is where updated access info and locations can be found. Access properties frequently change from year to year and sometimes even within a season. It is advised to double-check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public.

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU or permit hunt are online.

**UPLAND BIRD**

Benton and Franklin counties offer upland bird hunters many opportunities. Habitat and weather are the key components influencing the survival and reproductive success of birds. At the WDFW Sunnyside Wildlife Area, funding has been allocated for enhancing nesting opportunities for several species, including pheasant, quail, and doves.
**Figure 5.** District 4 upland bird harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

**PHEASANT**

In 2018, ring-necked pheasant hunters and harvest in District 4 increased for the third year in a row from recent lows (Figure 6).

![Graph showing pheasant harvest and hunters in District 4 from 2009 to 2018.](image)

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

WDFW currently does not monitor pheasant populations but each summer, biologists with the Yakama Nation conduct pheasant productivity surveys (Figure 7). Last year’s count of 0.17 birds/mile is below their 10-year average of 0.29. Pheasant populations are often limited by cold, wet weather, especially if it occurs during the spring brood-rearing season. This can have a local effect, so data from one area are difficult to extrapolate broadly. Trends in harvest across the district may be more useful.
Figure 7. Pheasants per mile during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation at [http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php](http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php).

Pheasant hunters should focus efforts in dense weedy and grassy areas adjacent to wetlands, streams, and irrigation waterways. Birds may also be found around irrigated farmland. Some of the best pheasant habitat in the district is in north Franklin County on and surrounding WDFW’s Windmill Ranch Unit (nontoxic shot), Mesa Lake Unit, and the Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Each of these hunting areas has 2 designated parking areas where hunters are required to park and register, and each allows a maximum of 8 vehicles per lot. Other areas with good pheasant habitat include USFWS’ Hanford Reach National Monument’s East Wahluke Unit, Ringold (GMU 379), and Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge along the Columbia River, near the town of Paterson.

Pursuing birds planted as part of WDFW’s Pheasant Enhancement Program is a great way to work dogs and gain experience for new hunters. Last year, WDFW planted pheasants at four locations: the Hope Valley Unit of the WDFW Sunnyside Wildlife Area, and the Toothaker, Big Flat, and Lost Island Habitat Management Units (HMU) held by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) (Figure 8). Pheasant release site locations can be found on WDFW’s Hunting Regulations Webmap (be sure Pheasant Release Sites is checked) or at the program link above. Army Corps HMUs information contact is available [here](http). Nontoxic shot is required at all pheasant release sites.
QUAIL

Abundant California quail are present in the district. There has been a decreasing trend in harvest numbers over the past decade (Figure 5). Surveys conducted by the Yakama Nation show that quail numbers vary greatly year to year, but 2018 saw an increase for quail in the region (Figure 9). The best quail habitat in District 4 is similar to those listed above for pheasant. In addition, anywhere along water bodies where riparian and herbaceous vegetation intersect will provide quail habitat. An ideal setting is where Russian olives or willows are adjacent to black greasewood or sagebrush.
Figure 9. Average quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation at [http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php](http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php).

**DOVE**

Mourning dove harvest in District 4 has been increasing over the past several years (Figure 5). Harvest numbers for 2018 remain high. There should be opportunity for hunters to find doves moving through the area and in local patches where production has been successful. Weather patterns play a critical role in determining how many doves are present during the season opener. Focus hunting efforts in or near wheat or corn stubble fields in the irrigated Yakima and Columbia Basins. The best combination of habitat includes a stubble field near water and large isolated trees or power lines where doves perch and attract other doves.

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

**WATERFOWL**

There are many places to hunt ducks and geese in the district. Small ponds and lakes can be found on WDFW’s Windmill Ranch Unit, Mesa Lake Unit, and Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. This year, wetland management activities will result in increased open water areas at the Windmill and Bailie Youth Ranches in time for the waterfowl season. Continued management of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area units will result in more habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for
hunters in the coming years. Scooteney Reservoir, managed by the Bureau of Reclamation, can also provide good hunting. The Snake and Columbia Rivers and associated water bodies will hold tens of thousands of ducks when the cold weather sets in. See details and map in the Public Lands Section of this document below. Access can be gained at the USFWS McNary and Umatilla NWRs and the Hanford Reach National Monument, or one of the many WDFW managed Water Access Sites on the Hunting Regulations Webmap (be sure Water Access Sites is checked).

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, please see Let’s Go Waterfowl Hunting on the WDFW website.

The five-year average of ducks harvested in District 4 over the past decade has been increasing while the goose harvest has been stable (Figure 10). After the season opener, hunter success will likely taper off as the local ducks become educated and restrict their daytime movements to local reserves and sanctuaries. At that point, hunters will likely have to wait for the migrants to arrive in the mid to late season. Weather patterns will determine when they will arrive and where they will congregate.

![Figure 10. District 4 waterfowl harvest trends based on five-year running averages.](image)

Canada geese nest on various river islands in the district, and counts indicate a continued upward recovery since decreases in the early 2000s. In addition, thousands of migratory Canada geese will arrive in the district sometime in October or November. They can be pursued in the farm fields near the Snake and Columbia Rivers. Most of the land is private property, so hunters will need to secure permission before hunting.

Changes to the statewide goose regulations in 2017 set daily limits for snow and white-fronted geese in addition to Canada/cackling (dark) geese. Whereas white-fronted geese and the majority
of snow geese usually pass through the district before and after the goose season (Figure 11), an increasing number of snow geese have been present in the district during goose season, but peak in February/March. In response to this, WDFW has set up a 2018 White Goose Season! The dates in District 4 (Goose Area 4) will run from Feb 22- March 4 for Snow, Ross’s, and Blue Geese. Snow geese are found in large flocks on farmland near the Snake or Columbia Rivers (especially by Plymouth) and McNary NWR, but a few can occasionally mix in with large flocks of dark geese at any location.

![Seasonal Abundance of 3 Goose Species in the Columbia Basin](image)

**Figure 11.** Seasonal abundance of three goose species in the Columbia Basin relative to hunting seasons. Data source: [eBird.org](http://www.eBird.org)

The Cropland Hunting Access Initiative is a program aimed at increasing waterfowl hunting access in the Columbia Basin. Benton and Franklin county farmers are currently being contacted to determine their interest in delaying tillage of corn and wheat stubble and providing hunter access on those acres. To ensure a quality hunting experience, properties are open for hunting only on goose days, and can be reserved via the Hunt by Reservation system. Watch the [WDFW website](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov) for updated maps and directions to these fields in the coming weeks.
In January-March 2017, and again in 2018, outbreaks of avian cholera occurred at the end of the hunting season in the Tri-Cities area, impacting thousands of waterfowl. The past three summers, Botulism outbreaks killed several hundred more waterfowl. There is no long-term impact to regional waterfowl populations expected from these incidents and the diseases pose no risks to human health. Fast response can contain outbreaks and hunters are encouraged to report groups of more than five sick or dead birds to the regional WDFW office: 509-575-2740.

MAJOR PUBLIC LANDS

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

SUNNYSIDE WILDLIFE AREA

This wildlife area (Figure 12) comprises WDFW-owned land in the district and most parcels are open to hunting, but with specific restrictions at some units. Most of the units are managed specifically for wildlife, and enhanced hunting opportunities are possible through crop, habitat, and wetland management. For more information, please visit the WDFW website.
The USFWS allows hunting on a number of units of this refuge complex, including a portion of the Hanford Reach National Monument, a portion of the Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge, and certain areas within the McNary National Wildlife Refuge. Hunting lottery information, regulations, and maps can be found here.

THE COLUMBIA AND SNAKE RIVERS

All islands, except privately owned islands, and the Benton County shoreline below the high water mark, Central Hanford Department of Energy property, and any peninsula originating on the Benton County shoreline between Vernita Bridge on Highway 24 downstream to the Richland city limits are designated as closed areas to hunting wild animals and wild birds. The only exception is waterfowl hunting, which is open below the high water mark between the old Hanford townsite power line crossing (wooden towers) and the Richland city limits. These details are printed in the Big Game Regulations on page 95. Several other closures and reserves impact river hunting in the district (Figure 13).
Figure 13. Generalized map of Tri-cities Area rivers, game reserves, closures, and municipalities.

The Columbia River, all islands (except privately owned), the Benton Co shoreline and peninsulas below the high water mark, and Central Hanford DOE property, between the Vernita Bridge and Richland city limits are CLOSED to hunting except waterfowl hunting is open below the high watermark between the Hanford town site wooden pole power lines and Richland city limits.

Richland City limits include the 3 islands north of I-182 and waters surrounding them. The Franklin Co side is open to hunting from Pasco city limits to the wooden power lines at the Hanford town site.

City ordinances may ban firearms (Pasco) and hunting (Richland, Kennewick) on incorporated lands. Check with local municipalities for restrictions.

Hunting waterfowl near grain elevator sites may violate federal baiting laws.

Warning. This map is intended for illustrative purposes only and should not be used to determine legal boundaries. WDFW does not accept responsibility for errors or omissions in this map. Refer to hunting pamphlets and WACs for regulations, seasons, and legal boundaries.

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OTHER PUBLIC LANDS

The DNR manages land that is open to hunting unless otherwise posted. Benton and Franklin counties have a large amount of DNR acreage, but it is often leased to private landowners for agriculture. While leased land is still open to hunting, hunters should always be aware that adjacent landowners are often managing DNR land as part of their business operations, and hunters should be respectful of property boundaries. Consult a public lands map or Hunting Regulations Webmap for more information. A Public Lands layer is on the default base map.

Various other public agencies own or manage land within Benton and Franklin counties that may also be open to hunting. BLM allows hunting at Juniper Dunes and other properties within the district. The USACE and the Bureau of Reclamation also allow hunting on portions of their land.

PRIVATE LANDS

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

Information about private lands access sites, including site-specific regulations, locations, season availability, and contact information, can be found here and at the WDFW Hunting Regulations Webmap (check box for PHLO) or by contacting Seth Hulett, the WDFW Private Lands Biologist for Districts 4 and 8: 509-786-1923 x109.

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

Hunt by Reservation

The Hunt by Reservation program requires hunters to register online. Hunters are required to print out and carry a permit, and they are provided a map of the property. In Benton and Franklin counties, multiple opportunities are available for both big game and bird hunting. Opportunities are only listed once available for reservation, which is usually a few weeks prior to the season. https://privatelands.wdfw.wa.gov/private_lands/type/25/
Feel Free to Hunt

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

Register to Hunt

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

Hunt by Written Permission

Hunt by Written Permission sites require hunters to make contact with the landowner. Landowners then issue permits to hunters at their discretion and hunters are expected to carry this permit while they hunt. Landowner contact information can only be found on the yellow signs marking the site. WDFW does not give out contact info online or by phone. There are several Hunt by Written Permission properties within District 4, and they provide opportunities for both big game and bird hunting.
Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU and Permit Hunt for all game species are online at https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/management/game-harvest

WDFW has released a Regulations Web Map to search for game seasons and private land access around the state: https://geodataservices.wdfw.wa.gov/huntregs/. The GoHunt webapp is no longer updated or functional.

A good starting point for hunters looking for a place to hunt is the WebMap that provides hunters with information about public and private lands access points, GMU boundaries, hunting seasons, pheasant release sites, water access points, landscape features such as roads and topography, public lands, and a great deal more (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Depiction of private lands access and public lands layers in District 4 from WDFW’s Regulations Web Map.