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DISTRICT 6 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Okanogan County

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All photos by Scott Fitkin unless otherwise noted.

FIRE AND ROAD CONDITIONS UPDATE

For the first time in six years, no major fires are burning in District 6 as of mid-August. In addition, several U.S. Forest Service (USFS) roads are repaired and/or reopened. Some road closures remain such as the last few miles of the Chewuch River Road (USFS 5160-250) and scattered spur roads on the Methow Ranger District.

As always, check with the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest for current information on fire activity, access closures, and campfire restrictions.

For more information, see:

- [Okanogan National Forest, Methow Valley Ranger District](#)
- [DNR Regulated Fire Restrictions](#)
- [InciWeb Current Fire Status](#)
- [Okanogan County Emergency Management](#)

DISTRICT 6 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 6 is located along the Canadian border in north-central Washington and encompasses 10 game management units: 203 (Pasayten), 204 (Okanogan East), 209 (Wannacut), 215 (Sinlahekin), 218 (Chewuch), 224 (Perrygin), 231 (Gardner), 233 (Pogue), 239 (Chiliwist), and 242 (Alta).

The western two-thirds of the district, stretching from the Okanogan River to the Pacific Crest, lies on the east slope of the Cascade Range and is dominated by mountainous terrain that gets more rugged as you move from east to west. Vegetation in this portion of the district ranges from desert/shrubsteppe at the lowest elevations to various types of conifer forests, culminating in alpine tundra on the higher peaks, which top out at almost 9,000 feet. More than three-quarters of the land base in this portion of the county is in public ownership, offering extensive hunting access. Game is plentiful and dispersed throughout the area for most of the year, concentrating in the lower elevations in winter when deep snows cover much of the landscape.

GMU 204 includes the eastern one-third of the district (from the Okanogan River east to the Okanogan County line) and features moderately rolling terrain, generally rising in elevation as you move east. The vegetation changes from shrubsteppe near the Okanogan River to a mix of tall grass and conifer forest throughout the remainder of the unit. This portion of the district is roughly a 50/50 patchwork of public and private land, with the public lands generally being higher in elevation. Again, game is plentiful and dispersed throughout.

Weather in the Okanogan District can be quite variable and capable of changing quickly in the fall. Be prepared for everything from warm, sunny days to the possibility of winter temperatures and significant snow at higher elevations by the second week of October.

Please be respectful of private land and treat landowners and their property the way you would want to be treated if roles were reversed.



From top: Methow Wildlife Area and Pasayten Wilderness

Agency biologists will run a biological check and information station at the Red Barn in Winthrop both weekends of the modern firearm general deer season. We encourage hunters to stop and provide data to biologists whether they have harvested a deer or not. Data collected assists in assessing herd health and shaping population management.

ELK

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Overall, elk numbers are low in District 6. However, conditions vary noticeably between the east and west portions of Okanogan County. The western two-thirds of the district are not currently covered under a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) elk herd management plan, and the existing harvest strategy (any elk general season) is designed to minimize elk numbers to prevent agricultural damage. As such, elk are quite scarce west of the Okanogan River very difficult to find without extensive local knowledge.

The eastern portion of the district (GMU 204) is covered by the Selkirk Elk Herd Plan. Its four primary goals are:

1. To preserve, protect, perpetuate, manage, and enhance elk and their habitats to ensure healthy, productive populations and ecosystem integrity;
2. To manage this elk herd for a sustained hunting yield;
3. To manage elk for a variety of recreational, educational, and aesthetic purposes, including hunting, scientific study, cultural and ceremonial uses by Native Americans, biodiversity, wildlife viewing, and photography; and
4. To manage elk and elk habitat to minimize human conflicts and agricultural damage.

More specifically, GMU 204 supports part of the Pend Oreille sub-herd population, where the current management objective is to gradually increase elk numbers while addressing the above four goals. As a result, this unit is now managed with an any bull harvest during general modern firearm and muzzleloader seasons. Elk are not currently abundant enough to warrant a survey effort in District 6, but observations suggest numbers continue to increase in GMU 204 and improve harvest opportunity accordingly.

For specific harvest information see the [District 6 2018 General Season Elk Harvest](#).



Bull elk

WHICH GMU SHOULD ELK HUNTERS HUNT?

As noted above, GMU 204 is the only GMU in District 6 with a significant number of elk. Within this unit, elk tend to be most numerous in the area from Havillah north through the Molson and the Chesaw Wildlife Area, the Waconda Summit / Mount Annie area, and USFS lands bordering the Colville Reservation. In the rest of the district, finding animals is extremely difficult unless you have up-to-date knowledge on one of the few small bands of elk that wax and wane in the western portion of the county.

DEER

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

District 6 supports perhaps the largest migratory mule deer herd in the state, and Okanogan County has long been prized by hunters for its mule deer hunting opportunity. The district also supports significant numbers of white-tailed deer, particularly in GMUs 204 and 215. The District 6 deer management objective is for stable to modestly increasing populations within the social tolerance limits for nuisance and damage issues.



Okanogan District mule deer buck

Fawn:doe ratios gathered during surveys from recent years indicate a modest decrease in deer populations in the wake of the recent extreme fires, severe droughts, and three modestly tough winters. However, as burned winter range continues to recover, landscape carrying capacity and deer numbers are expected to increase. Over-winter fawn survivorship was up following the recent mild winter, and the current wetter/cooler summer should aid deer productivity.

WHICH GMU SHOULD DEER HUNTERS HUNT?

All units in District 6 support significant numbers of deer, include large blocks of accessible public land, and offer good to excellent deer-hunting opportunity. Mule deer are abundant throughout the county, with the highest densities occurring in the western two-thirds of the district.

Overall, white-tailed deer are less numerous than mule deer in Okanogan County, and in contrast to mule deer, white-tailed deer abundance generally increases as you move east in the district. The largest population is in GMU 204, where white-tailed deer comprise about half of the overall deer population. Although white-tailed deer numbers are less abundant in the western portion of the district, they are still found in most all drainages up to mid-elevations, particularly those with significant riparian vegetation. The highest concentrations in this area are in the Sinlahekin Valley and surrounding drainages. In many areas west of GMU 204 and outside of the

Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, white-tailed deer frequent private lands. Prospective hunters wishing to target white-tailed deer may want to seek permission in advance of the season to access individual ownerships.

Hunters harvested 1,874 (1,637 bucks, 237 antlerless) deer in District 6 during the 2018 general seasons. This total is about a 28 percent dip below the 5-year average, but above the 10-year low of 1,811 animals taken in 2008. General season success rates generally rose slightly from the previous season but remained below their respective five-year averages and broke out as follows: Modern – 13 percent, Muzzleloader – 24 percent, Archery – 28 percent, and Multiple – 26 percent.

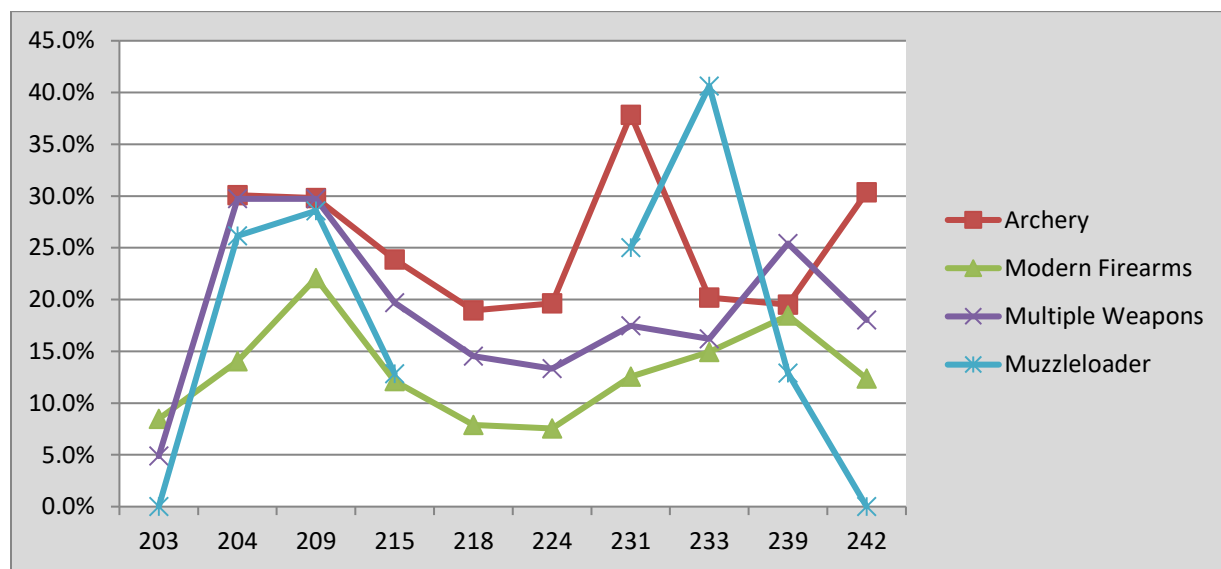


Figure 1. District 6 2018 general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU

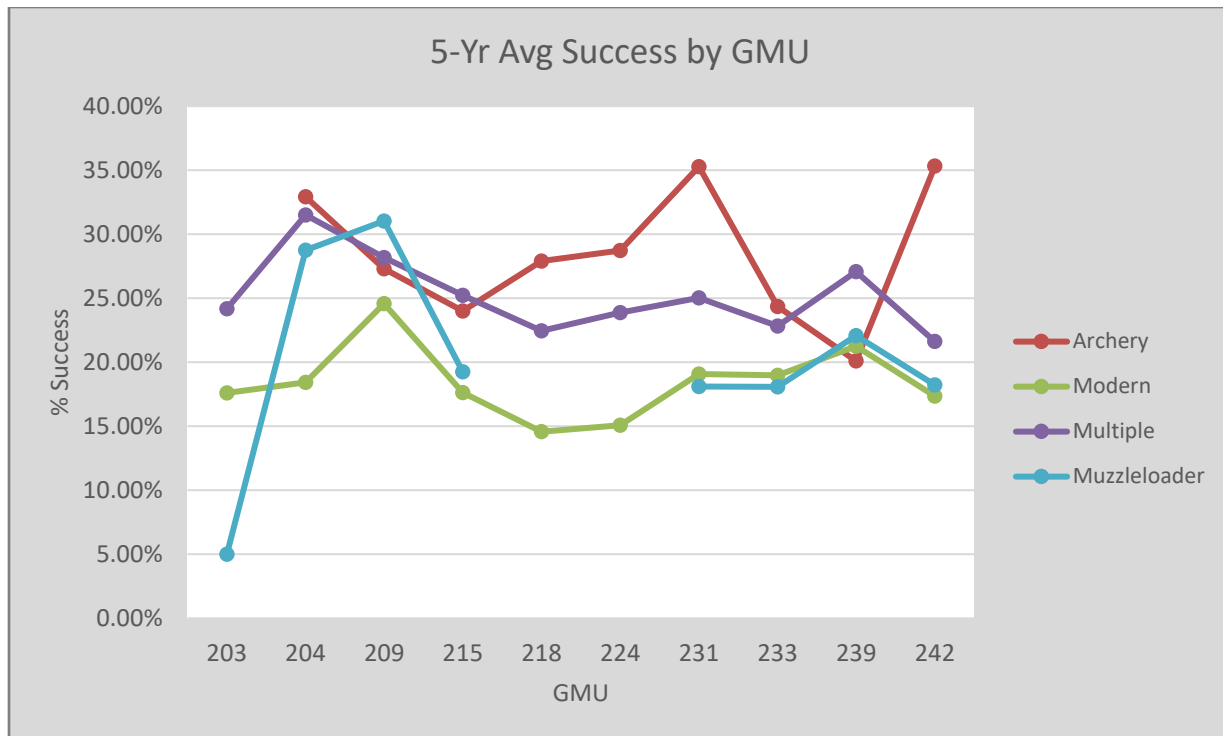


Figure 2. District 6 5-year average general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU

As expected, GMU 204 (the district's largest unit) yielded the greatest overall general season harvest of 619 animals. In the western portion of District 6, GMU 215 produced the most harvest with 249 deer taken.

For specific harvest information see: [District 6 2018 General Season Deer Harvest](#)
[District 6 2018 Special Permit Harvest](#)

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2019 SEASON

Lower than average estimated fawn recruitment following the 2016-17 and 2017-18 winters likely means a dip in 2.5- and 3.5-year-old buck availability. However, the 2018 postseason buck:doe ratio remained respectable at 19 bucks per 100 does, and with over a third of those being greater than or equal to 3 points, older age class buck availability looks decent. Overall, total general season harvest and success rates are anticipated to be around the 2017 numbers, somewhere above the 10-year low and below the five-year average. Opportunities for older age class bucks during the late permit seasons look good.

Summer thus far has been one of the coolest and wettest in many years, particularly in the high country. As a result, deer are likely to be widely dispersed at higher elevations and will likely stay high on green forage thru the general season barring unseasonable cold early fall weather.

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT MULE DEER

During the early general seasons, deer will generally be widely distributed on the landscape and not yet concentrated in migration areas or on winter range. Mature bucks in particular are often at high elevations in remote locations as long as succulent vegetation is available. In general,

older, higher elevation burns, including the Tripod, Thirty-mile, Farewell, and Needles Fires, are producing high quality summer forage and are a good bet for significant deer activity. Although mule deer will use a variety of habitat types, they will often forage well into fairly open environments, particularly at dawn and dusk. As a result, they can often be glassed and stalked from considerable distance.

During the high hunt, deer will definitely still be spread across the landscape and are found in good numbers throughout the Pasayten Wilderness. Easier access to higher, more open country for hunters on foot is located at the Harts Pass and Iron Gate trailheads at the western and eastern ends of the wilderness respectively. For those with horses, the Andrews Creek and Billy Goat trailheads offer access to good deer terrain further in. The Thirty-Mile trailhead is currently inaccessible due to a road closure.

For Youth, Senior, and Disabled Hunters holding antlerless tags, does are spread throughout the district during the general season, so permit holders should be able to find antlerless animals anywhere they have legal access.

During the late permit seasons, most deer will have moved to winter range areas at lower elevations, often on more southerly slopes, to participate in the breeding season. In District 6, WDFW wildlife areas and immediately adjacent federal lands are good bets for high deer numbers in late fall, although in low-snow years, some mature bucks may linger at higher elevations. In exceptionally mild years, hunters may have to go a bit higher than usual to find deer concentrations. Some GMU-specific recommendations for late mule deer permit holders are as follows:

GMU 215: Look for deer on the south facing slopes in the Toats Coulee drainage, open portions of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area (SWA), and south facing slopes of the major drainages to the west of the Sinlahekin, including Cecil, Sarsapkin, and Sinlahekin creeks and their tributaries.

GMU 218: The Rendezvous Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area (MWA), and the Cub Creek, Buck Lake, and Lower Boulder Creek area of the Okanogan National Forest (ONF) are good bets.

GMU 224: Favorite spots are portions of the MWA and adjacent ONF lands in the southern portion of the unit. This includes more open habitat in drainages such as Pearrygin, Ramsay, Bear, Blue Buck, Beaver, and Frazier creeks.

GMU 231: Check out the Big Buck portion of the MWA, as well as the Virginia Ridge, Thompson Ridge, and Little Bridge Creek areas of the ONF.

GMU 233: The main unit and Pogue Mountain Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area (SCWA), the Carter Mountain Unit of the SWA, and public land in the Salmon Creek Drainage are good places to start.

GMU 239: The Texas Creek Unit of the MWA and the Chiliwist Unit of the SWA along with adjacent Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land offer good opportunities. Upper portions of Finley, Benson, and Texas creeks on the ONF are also worth a look.

GMU 242: Look for deer on the Golden Doe Unit of the MWA and on south facing slopes on public land in the Libby Creek and Gold Creek drainages.



Okanogan District white-tailed deer buck

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT WHITE-TAILED DEER

White-tailed deer are typically far less migratory than mule deer and generally favor brushier country with denser cover, primarily at lower and middle elevations. Look for white-tailed deer along stream drainages and in other areas with riparian vegetation or thick cover. Like mule deer, white-tailed deer are most active at dawn and dusk, but often won't venture as far into larger openings unless under the cover of darkness. Look for white-tailed deer in edge habitats where denser cover abruptly transitions into more open meadows. Many white-tailed deer hunters will wait patiently at a stationary position along an obvious game trail or the forest edge, often employing the use of a blind or tree stand.

During the late permit season, some white-tailed deer summering at modestly high elevations will move a little ways downslope, but most will be in the same areas they inhabited during summer. GMU-specific recommendations for late permit holders and late archery season in the western portion of the district are as follows:

GMU 215: White-tailed deer are abundant on the SWA and Chopaka Unit of the SCWA.

GMU 218: Look for deer in the Eight-mile drainage, along the Chewuch River, and in the lower half of the Rendezvous Unit of the MWA (despite the open habitat).

GMU 224: Brushier areas along Bear Creek, Upper Beaver Creek and its tributaries, and basin drained by the West Fork Salmon Creek west of Conconully are good bets.

GMU 231: Good possibilities include the huntable portion of the Big Valley Unit of the MWA, and the portion of the unit in the Twisp River Valley (north of the Twisp River Road). White-tailed deer can sometimes be encountered on the south slopes of the Big Buck Unit of the MWA as they move uphill off private land.

GMU 233: Despite the open terrain, the Happy Hill area of the SCWA is productive, along with the Buzzard Lake Unit of the SWA and adjacent DNR lands.

GMU 239: White-tailed deer can be found on ONF land in the South Summit area between Loup Loup Pass and Leecher Mountain and in wetter areas in the western portion of the Chiliwist Unit of the SWA and adjacent DNR lands.

GMU 242: Productive areas include the brushy areas along the river and in the northern half of the Golden Doe Unit of the MWA, as well as the valley bottom of the Twisp River drainage. Public land along Libby and Gold creeks is also a possibility.

Antlerless white-tailed deer permit holders should look for animals in the same areas mentioned above with the added expectation of a few more deer in the higher reaches of areas like the Twisp River and Eight-mile drainages than might be expected during the late season.

DEER AREAS

For those hunters with second deer permits in Deer Areas 2012 - 2016, remember that those permits are good **only on private land**. Permit holders are responsible for contacting private landowners to secure hunting access.

BLACK BEAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Black bears are abundant and well-distributed throughout District 6, and are managed for sustainable harvest and diverse age structure. Monitored demographic parameters suggest the local population and associated harvest appear to be relatively stable, so hunting prospects in the district should be good.

For hunters pursuing black bear in the northern Cascades, it is critical to positively identify the bear species, as endangered grizzly bears potentially also inhabit these areas. WDFW's website features some interactive training materials on how to tell the difference between black and grizzly bears. View the Interactive Bear Identification Program and take the Bear Identification Test at [WDFW's website](#).

WHICH GMU SHOULD BEAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All GMUs in the Okanogan District provide good black bear hunting opportunity. In 2018, hunters posted a success rate of 8.3 percent and harvested 109 black bears from the western portion of the district in the Okanogan Bear Management Unit (BMU 5), both of which were close to the 5-year averages. GMU 204 in the Northeastern BMU yielded 47 animals, a little below the 5-year average of 54.

For specific harvest information see: [Okanogan BBMU 2018 Black Bear Harvest](#)
[Northeastern BBMU 2018 Black Bear Harvest](#)

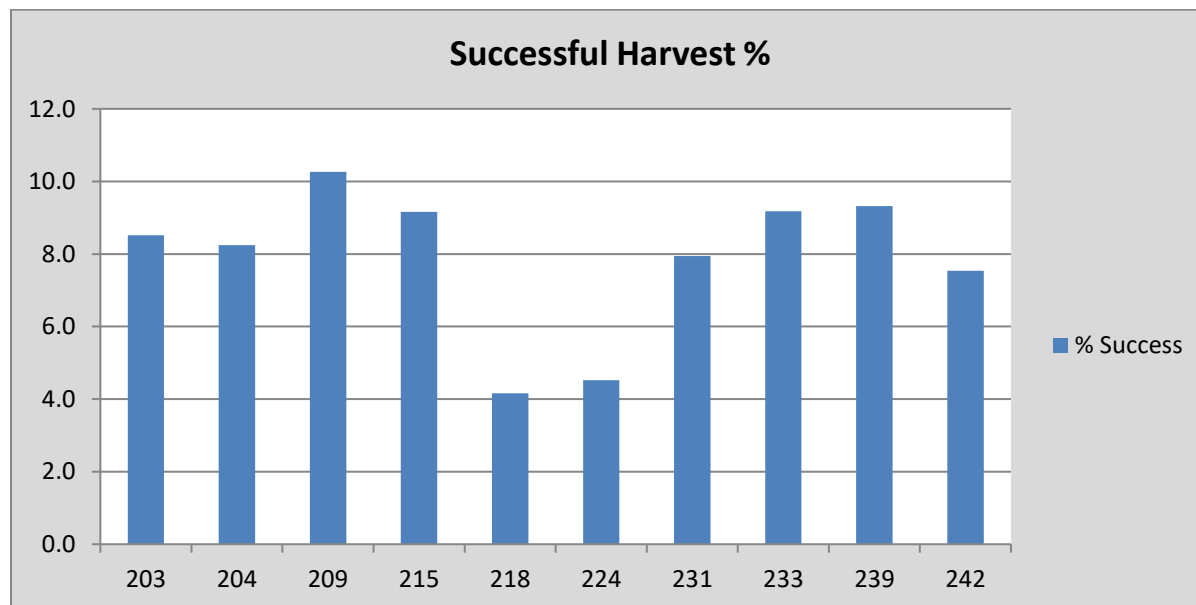


Figure 3. Okanogan District 5-year average black bear harvest success rates by GMU



Black bear

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2019 SEASON

In general, at the beginning of bear season, animals are likely to be found at middle elevations in areas where berries are peaking. As the season progresses, expect bears to follow the ripening berries to higher elevations. As we move into fall, animals will range over a wider gradient to take advantage of a variety of late-season food sources. This year, after a late onset for service berries, a warm spell accelerated the development of the later crops and timing should be about average as bear season arrives. Berry crops look good across most shrub species this year.

COUGAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

The District 6 cougar population is healthy and dispersed throughout the landscape. In the Okanogan District, cougars are managed by a harvest guideline at the scale of one or two GMUs to better promote stable population structure and high quality sustainable harvest, while also minimizing human-cougar conflicts.

Cougars follow the deer herds, which means they will be spread throughout the district through late October and concentrate more at lower elevations as deer move to winter range. Much cougar foraging activity takes place at night, so the best opportunities to spot the cats on the move are at dawn and dusk.

WHICH GMU SHOULD COUGAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All Okanogan District GMUs support cougars and are open to hunting. After Jan. 1, individual PMUs (one or more GMUs) close on short notice once the harvest guideline has been reached, and hunters are responsible for knowing if a unit is open or closed. This information is available on the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) or [online](#).

Last season, harvest exceeded the guideline in only one PMU, and control-related mortality remained modest. As a result, cougar numbers should be robust and hunting opportunities in District 6 should be good in 2019-20. See the 5-year harvest summary table below.

PMU Hunt Area (GMUs)	Harvest Guideline	2014-2015 Harvest	2015-2016 Harvest	2016-2017 Harvest	2017-2018 Harvest	2018-2019 Harvest
203	4-6	0	0	0	0	0
204	6-8	1	7	2	6	10
209, 215	3-5	4	5	3	5	4
218, 231	4-6	2	2	3	0	3
224	2-3	1	1	3	2	3
233, 239	3-4	1	3	5	1	4
242, 243	6-7	3	4	3	2	7

Table 1. District 6 cougar harvest guidelines and 5-year harvest by GMU

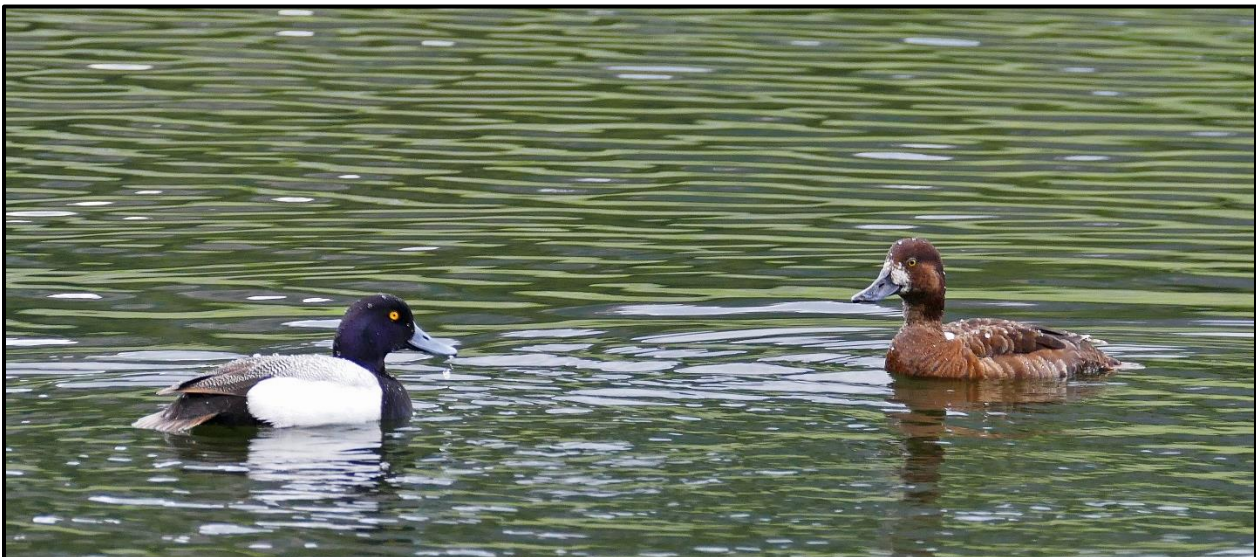


Cougar

WATERFOWL

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Okanogan District offers modest waterfowl hunting opportunities as compared to many other areas of the state. The largest concentrations of birds occur at the southern edge of District 6, at the mouth of the Okanogan River and on the Columbia River. The main stem of the Okanogan and Upper Similkameen rivers and the larger lakes and potholes in the Okanogan Watershed are good secondary sites. Good public river access is found at the Washburn Island Unit of the Wells Wildlife Area, the Driscoll-Eyhott Island Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, and the Similkameen-Chopaka Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area.





From top: lesser Scaup pair and Canada geese

Water levels in local potholes fell following a mild winter and some dried up entirely. River levels are currently running below normal and are likely to be similar going into the hunting season. Aside from water levels, waterfowl hunting opportunities are mostly dependent on the number of migrants coming from Canada and Alaska, and how long water remains ice-free throughout the district.

For specific harvest information see: [Canada Goose Harvest by County](#),
[Duck Harvest by County](#)

FOREST GROUSE

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

The Okanogan supports strong populations of ruffed, dusky (blue), and spruce grouse found throughout the forested areas of the district. Ruffed grouse are generally associated with deciduous tree cover at lower to middle elevations, particularly in riparian habitats. During hunting season, dusky (blue) grouse are generally found in the mid to upper elevation conifer forests, often moving to ridges as snow begins to accumulate. Spruce grouse are located in higher elevation conifer forests throughout the district on a year-round basis.

Forest grouse populations are likely below historical norms within the boundaries of recent large wildfires, including the Carlton Complex, Okanogan Complex, Tunk Block, and Tripod, Diamond Creek, and Crescent Mountain fires. These fires burned in some of the best and most

densely occupied forest grouse habitat in the district. However, grouse habitat within the burns is improving annually (particularly in the Tripod Fire area), and bird numbers outside of burned areas appear to be relatively stable.

HARVEST TRENDS AND 2019 PROSPECTS

The sprawling landscape of Okanogan yielded a mixed harvest of 6,692 dusky, ruffed, and spruce grouse, very similar to the previous season and down 10 percent from the five-year average. Spring conditions appeared favorable this year and anecdotal observations suggest dusky grouse productivity may have been good, creating expectations for harvest and success rates equal to or better than last season.

For specific harvest information see: [Forest Grouse Harvest by County](#).



From left: female spruce grouse and male ruffed grouse.

PHEASANTS

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Pheasants occur at low densities and in a patchy distribution throughout the Okanogan Watershed portion of District 6, with most harvested birds coming from pheasant release sites. This year, pheasants will again be released at the Bureau of Reclamation's Hegdal and Kline sites, and at the Chilliwist Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area. What little wild production exists within the county comes mostly from private land. Hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private property.

The release sites are mapped in the Eastern Washington Pheasant Release booklet found here: [Eastern Washington Pheasant Release Program](#). Hunters are reminded that nontoxic shot is required for **all** upland bird hunting on **all** pheasant release sites statewide.

Hunters bagged 1,562 pheasants last year in Okanogan County, more than doubling the tally from the previous year. Hunting pressure increased only slightly, suggesting an improvement in natural pheasant reproduction supplementing the release program.

For specific harvest information see: [Pheasant Harvest by County](#)



Pheasant release – Photo by Jeff Heinlen

QUAIL

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Quail are locally abundant and widespread throughout the district's lower elevation shrubsteppe and open pine forest habitats. District 6 Wildlife Areas offer good access to quail habitat. In 2018, hunters took 14,475 quail in Okanogan County, up almost 70 percent despite an increase in hunting pressure of less than half that. Similar to pheasants, this suggests good natural reproduction. Anecdotal observations this spring and summer suggest quail production has been

good again this year, with some birds having multiple clutches, suggesting 2019 may be another strong year for quail.

For specific harvest information see: [Quail Harvest by County](#)

TURKEYS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Turkeys are found in scattered groups throughout the district and often concentrate on private land near agriculture areas. Prospective hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private land. The fall turkey permit season occurs within GMUs 218-231 and 242, with the majority of the birds located in the latter two units where turkeys appear to be on the increase over the last couple of years.

CHUKAR AND GRAY PARTRIDGE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In general, gray partridge populations are widely distributed and patchy throughout the district's shrubsteppe habitats, but appear to be increasing in numbers and distribution over time. Birds are frequently seen on the Indian Dan, Chiliwist, and Methow Wildlife Areas. Scattered groups of chukars are found in the rocky areas in lower elevations of District 6. The steep hills along the Similkameen River in the north part of the Okanogan Valley hold good numbers of birds.



Gray Partridge

Harvest of chukar and gray partridge fell in 2018, in part due to reductions in hunter pressure. This year's mild winter combined with good forage production this spring suggest we could see improved opportunities in 2019.

For specific harvest information see: [Gray Partridge Harvest by County](#)
[Chukar Partridge Harvest by County](#)

DOVE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Similar to chukar and partridge, dove harvest and harvest pressure declined in 2018. The recent mild winter and good forage growth this year make the outlook good for doves in 2019. Look for doves in planted food crops in the Sinlahekin and at lower elevations on other public land. Hunting success will depend on warm weather keeping the birds in the area through the season.

For specific harvest information see: [Mourning Dove Harvest by County](#)