

2020

ROBERT WADDELL, District Wildlife Biologist  
CALLIE MOORE, Assistant District Wildlife Biologist



Washington  
Department of  
**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**



*Photo credit: Robert Waddell*

# 2020 DISTRICT 14 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Skagit & Whatcom Counties

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISTRICT 14 GENERAL OVERVIEW .....	1
Current Species Status .....	3
ELK.....	4
DEER .....	7
BEAR .....	9
COUGAR.....	11
MOUNTAIN GOAT.....	12
UPLAND BIRDS.....	14
Pheasant .....	14
Forest Grouse.....	15
Turkey.....	17
Eurasian Collared Dove.....	17
Band-Tailed Pigeon .....	18
WATERFOWL.....	18
Dabbling Ducks .....	18
Sea Ducks .....	20
Black brant.....	21
Canada Geese .....	22
Lesser Snow Geese.....	23
HUNTER ACCESS .....	26
PUBLIC LANDS .....	28
Island Unit .....	29
Samish Unit .....	30

Johnson/DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit.....	31
Skagit Bay Estuary .....	32
Lake Terrell Unit .....	34
Tennant Lake Unit.....	35
Nooksack Unit.....	36

## DISTRICT 14 GENERAL OVERVIEW

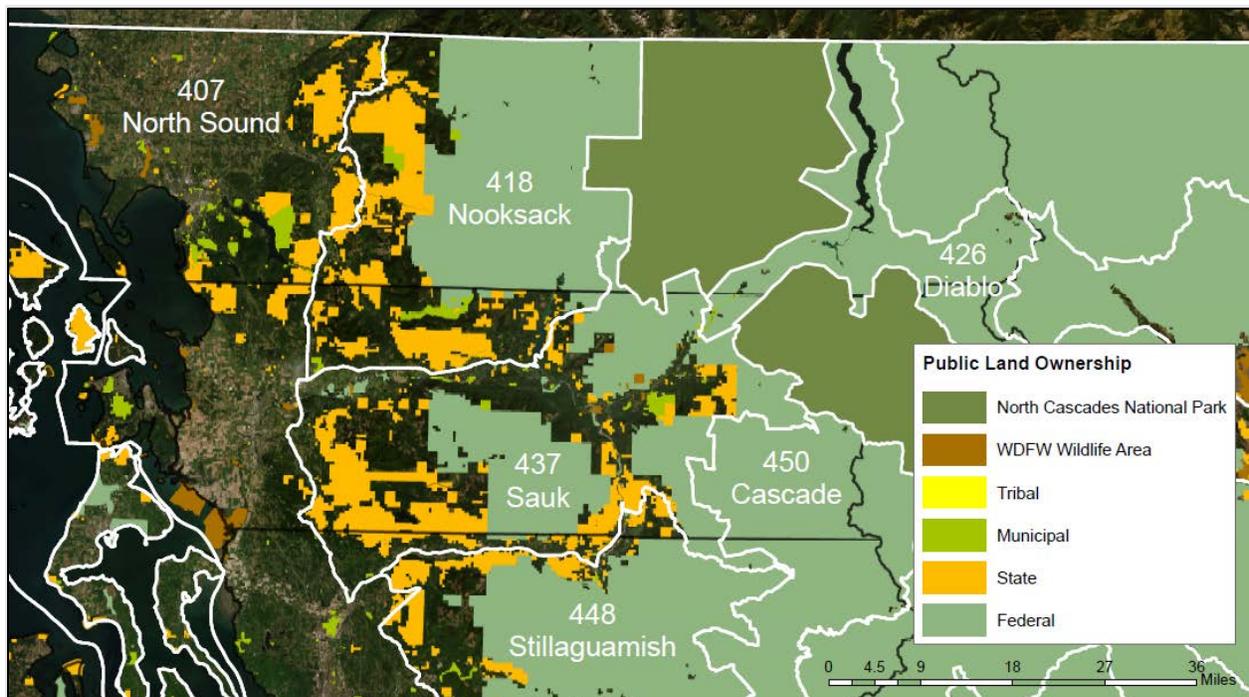
District 14, comprised of Skagit and Whatcom counties, is the most northwestern district in Washington. The western extent of the district is associated with marine waters of Puget Sound and features a vibrant agricultural land base. These lowlands support an abundance of wildlife in the Skagit Flats and western Whatcom County, including diverse and abundant flocks of resident and overwintering waterfowl species.

The Skagit and Nooksack rivers are the two primary river systems in the district and are fed by the Cascade Mountains and flow into Puget Sound. Most lower elevation forested uplands within these watersheds are owned or managed by private timber companies or the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR). These lower-elevation working forests provide good to excellent big game hunting opportunities for elk, black-tailed deer, black bear, and cougar. 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 Cascades Mountains and support game species such as mountain goat, black bear, and black-tailed deer.



*Mt. Baker in Whatcom County (Photo credit: Robert Waddell)*

From north to south, the core game management units (GMUs) that comprise District 14 are Nooksack and Diablo (GMUs 418 and 426), which are mostly in Whatcom County, and Sauk (GMU 437), which is almost entirely within Skagit County. Additionally, portions of North Sound, Stillaguamish, and Cascade (GMUs 407, 448, and 450) are also within the district (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Game management units in Skagit and Whatcom counties*

Among the many hunting opportunities within this district, perhaps 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 walk or bike-in 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 bears are otherwise not disturbed by hunters.

## 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 the [Washington 2020 Big Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet. 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 (mountain goats).

Like most of western Washington, District 14 does not host any native upland game bird populations and is not managed for these species. WDFW will continue to implement a pen-raised pheasant release program in Skagit and Whatcom counties in 2020–2021. 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 long season from Sept. 1 through Dec. 31. A daily bag limit of four of any species and no more than three of one species remains the same as previous years.

Due to high overall population sizes and stable reproductive rates of waterfowl, states within the Pacific Flyway will continue to enjoy extremely liberal hunting seasons in terms of the number of hunting days and bag limits. The decrease to a 1-bird daily bag limit for Northern Pintail will continue into this season because the nationwide change was in response to population estimates below established threshold limits. Within the district, hunting of lesser snow geese, Pacific brant, and sea ducks (e.g., Harlequin, scoter, long-tailed, and goldeneye) require hunters to apply for and possess a special migratory bird authorization while hunting and to submit a harvest report card by March 20, 2021, even if they did not harvest any birds. Hunters should reference the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet for more information.

## ELK

The North Cascades (Nooksack) elk herd continues to grow and expand into areas of formerly unoccupied habitat, including agricultural areas where elk-related damage to crops can occur. Based on the post-hunt survey conducted in spring 2020, the total population size of the North Cascades herd is approximately 1,500 animals. The 2020 survey indicated a bull-to-cow ratio of 22 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 calf recruitment.



*Photo credit: Kurt Russell*

Although the population of the North Cascades elk herd continues to increase, the WDFW population objective of approximately 2,000 elk has not been met. Since the establishment of 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 2020 are generally restricted to special permit hunts in GMU 418 and Elk Area 4941 (which is within GMU 437). A total of 50 any bull permits have been allocated (29 permits in GMU 418 and 21 permits in GMU 4941), with opportunities for hunters using archery gear, modern firearms, and muzzleloaders. Hunters successful in drawing a permit for GMU 418 should note that they are *not* allowed to also hunt Elk Area 4941, as permitted in previous years. The WDFW Private Lands Access program has partnered with Sierra Pacific Industries to provide access to their properties within GMU 418 for all elk special permit holders who draw a tag for GMU 418. Information about access to these lands will be provided to permit holders prior to the 2020 hunts. Within GMU 418, hunters looking for the highest chance of success should focus most of their efforts within the core elk area that includes: a northern boundary from Acme due east to Baker Lake, an eastern boundary along the western shorelines of Baker Lake and Lake Shannon to Highway 20, a southern boundary along Highway 20 to its juncture with Highway 9, and a western boundary of Highway 9 from Sedro-Woolley to Acme. However, hunters may find pockets of elk, including some high-quality bulls, outside this core area.

In Elk Area 4941, 28 additional permit opportunities for antlerless elk are available for Master Hunters and youth, senior, and hunters with disabilities during the 2020 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 provided more information about the hunt area prior to the 2020 hunts.



*Photo credit: Robert Waddell*

General season harvest opportunities for any elk in GMU 407 (North Sound) in Skagit and Whatcom Counties 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 adjacent GMUs that remain closed to general harvest. Hunters seeking public lands opportunities for these general season elk hunts should visit the [WDFW Hunt Regulations Web map](#) for more information.

GMU 407 tends to have greater numbers of elk than GMU 448, but access to private property typically is key to getting a real opportunity. Most elk in GMU 407 occur in and around Acme Valley, with few elk found west of the South Fork Nooksack River or north of the community of Van Zandt along Highway 9. 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 that borders private property in Acme Valley to the east. Though hunting pressure can 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 special permit 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 2019, the harvest success rate in GMU 418 was 77%, with 20 of 26 permit holders harvesting a bull elk. In Elk Area 4941, 10 of 18 permit holders harvested a bull elk for a 56% success rate.

Youth hunters, hunters 65 and older, and hunters with disabilities that draw a permit in Elk Area 4941 must harvest an antlerless elk. In 2019, 10 of 16 permit holders harvested a cow elk for a 63% success rate.

Changes to the 2020 hunting regulations specific to the North Cascades elk herd include:

- Increase in bull permits in GMU 418, from 26 permits in 2019 to 29 permits in 2020
- Increase in bull elk permits in Elk Area 4941, from 18 permits in 2019 to 21 permits in 2020

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 Planner Web map](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's 2020–2021 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers

showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

## DEER

WDFW is not currently 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 causing damage to some private property.



*Photo credit: Greg Green*

Hunters reported a total of 912 harvested deer during the 2019 general season in District 14 GMUs, similar to the 934 deer harvested during the 2018 season. From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 provides the best opportunity for successfully harvesting a deer in District 14. In

2019, 573 deer were harvested in GMU 407 during the general season hunts, similar to the 571 deer harvested in 2018. The next best option for hunters is GMU 437, with 194 deer harvested in 2019. The combined general season deer harvest within the other GMUs in the district (418 and 426) was 145 deer during the 2019 season. Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found online at [Game Harvest Reports](#).

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 take advantage of it. Though some public land opportunities exist in GMU 407, the key to a successful harvest in this GMU is securing the appropriate permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area before the hunting season. Hunters who intend to hunt deer in developed areas should review page 90 of the [Washington 2020 Big Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet and check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions.

Modern firearm hunters in District 14 may apply for a permit only, quality buck hunt during the late season 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. Permit hunter success rates during the 2019 season were 24% (GMU 418), 20% (GMU 437), and 10% (GMU 426) for hunters who participated. Sixty tags were issued, and hunters reported harvesting a total of 12 bucks for a 20% success rate overall.

WDFW was able to negotiate access to Sierra Pacific properties for six of the 25 permit holders in GMU 418 during the 2019 season and will provide the same opportunity for 2020 hunters. Hunters who draw a quality buck tag for GMU 418 will be provided 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, high elevation areas in the Mount Baker Wilderness in GMU 418 and Glacier Peak Wilderness in GMU 437 are open for the high buck hunt from Sept. 15 to 25. These areas can be accessed by using USFS roads and trail systems.

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 gated 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 Planner Web map](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's 2020–2021 hunting regulations and hunts based on

location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate 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 currently. 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 relatively 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.

A total of 199 bears were reported harvested during the fall 2019 hunt in GMUs 407, 418, 426, and 437, a 67% increase over the number of bears harvested during the 2018 season. Nearly 1,500 hunters experienced a 13% overall success rate in the four GMUs. Eighty-six of the 199 bears were harvest in GMU 418 for a 14% success rate.

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

Opportunities for harvesting a black bear in District 14 have more to do with access and berry production than does the previous year's harvest. Access behind gated roads is largely available to those willing to walk or mountain bike, and there are ample numbers of clear cuts with younger age class regeneration units that attract bears. Hunters willing to hunt fall bears in the early season and at higher elevations, and who are 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 a spring bear hunt is promoted to address damage caused by bears peeling young trees (primarily Douglas fir) on commercially managed forest lands. The Private Lands Access Program, managed by WDFW, coordinates access for permit hunters to areas behind private gates where bears are otherwise not disturbed by hunters. In the spring of 2020, 11 of 30 permit holders reported a bear harvest in the damage area during the nearly two-month season (May 5 – June 30; season dates altered due to COVID-19), for a success rate of 37%. Special permit hunts for the 2021 spring season will be announced in late fall 2020, and the submission period for applications will be Jan. 2 – Feb. 28, 2021.

All successful bear hunters must validate (notch) their bear tag and notify WDFW within 72 hours of harvest (excluding legal state holidays), providing the hunter's name, date, and location of kill, and sex of the animal. The raw pelt, evidence of sex, and the first premolar must be presented to an authorized WDFW employee for sealing within five (5) days of notification of kill.

Bear hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's 2020–2021 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

## COUGAR

Cougar hunting opportunities in District 14 are opportunistic, with most cougars harvested by hunters that happen upon a cougar while pursuing other game. The main prey for cougars in the district is largely black-tailed deer, so hunters who spend time in areas with more deer will increase their chances of seeing and harvesting a cougar.

A hunter who wishes to harvest a cougar must possess a valid big game license, which includes the cougar species option, prior to harvesting a cat. The use of dogs to recreationally pursue and harvest cougars is illegal statewide. 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, are covered by a cougar harvest guideline. GMUs 418, 426, and 437 have a harvest guideline of 10 – 13 animals, and GMUs 448 and 450 have a harvest guideline of 8 – 11 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 January 1, 2021. During the 2019–20 season, the cougar harvest did not exceed the guideline in these units, and they remained open throughout the season.

Hunters should remember that a 2020 hunting license is good from April 1, 2020 – March 31, 2021. Thus, a hunter wishing to hunt cougar in April 2021 will need to purchase a 2021–2022 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 (5) days of the notification of kill. Hunters must also report their harvest in the WILD system.

Cougar hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), a tool that provides information on Washington's 2020–2021 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

## MOUNTAIN GOAT



*Photo credit: Greg Green*

The Mount Baker area continues to have one of the largest concentrations of mountain goats in Washington. 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.

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

For 2020, six special permits were issued for the three mountain goat hunt areas in District 14: Chowder Ridge, Lincoln Peak, and Avalanche Gorge. A single tag holder will have sole access to the Chowder Ridge hunt area north of Mount Baker. The remaining five permit holders (two

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

Statewide harvest success rates for mountain goats are generally 75% or greater in any year, and the Mount Baker area has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. The 2019 season was an exception with regards to harvest success, with only two of six hunters harvesting two male goats (33% success).



*Photo credit: Brett Emmons*

WDFW strongly encourages hunters to refrain from shooting female goats (nannies). Although nannies can be legally taken by permit holders, mountain goats are slow to reach sexual maturity and display a slow production rate, thus they are very sensitive to the removal of adult females. Beginning in 2018, mountain goat hunt applicants drawn for a permit may only purchase their license after successfully completing the WDFW online mountain goat gender identification training. Additionally, please review the educational material sent to you if you draw a permit and make all efforts to harvest a male goat (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 from the others 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 invariably 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 opportunities.

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 website for a summary of [upland bird seasons](#), ideas for where to [hunt](#), and information on [The Basics of Upland Bird Hunting in Washington](#).

### PHEASANT

The purpose of the [pheasant release program](#) in western Washington is to provide additional upland bird hunting opportunities 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. 19–20) and the other before the senior hunt (Sept. 21–25). No releases will occur after this 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 17; see page 18 of the

[Washington Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet), but the site 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, and British Petroleum Cherry Point Refinery. WDFW will release approximately 450–500 birds each week, divided between the three units. Releases are performed by volunteers on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday each week during the season.



*Photo Credit: Ryan Askren*

In District 14, pheasant hunters must purchase 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, non-toxic shot is required for all upland bird, dove, and band-tailed pigeon hunting on all pheasant release sites statewide. For information on additional requirements please refer to the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet and [WDFW's Pheasant Hunting webpage](#). 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 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.

Hunters can increase their chances of harvesting sooty grouse 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.

WDFW collects wings and tails of hunter-harvested forest grouse (spruce, ruffed, dusky and sooty species) during the Sept. 1– Dec. 31 hunting season. The goal of collecting grouse wings and tails is to build datasets to better evaluate population trends that will aid in the management of forest grouse species.

Grouse hunters in District 14 can help by depositing one wing and the tail of each grouse harvested into wing collection barrels placed at the following two sites:

- Whatcom County - SE corner of the Welcome Grocery Store building (5565 Mt Baker Hwy, Deming)
- Whatcom County - Intersection of Baker Lake Rd and NF-12. (48.64914, -121.72875)



*Photo Credit: Callie Moore*

Please click the following links for more information on [hunting forest grouse](#) and [wing and tail collections](#) from hunter-harvested birds.

## TURKEY

The Eastern subspecies of wild turkey may be found in District 14, but they are uncommon with no predictable concentrations. Consequently, harvest prospects for this species remain very low even with significant hunter effort. Turkey harvest in this area likely represents less than 1% of the statewide turkey harvest. It is important to note that because harvest is reported at the GMU level, and GMUs 407 and 437 overlap with the adjacent district, reported harvest of birds in these GMUs may have occurred outside the district.

Hunters must acquire 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. Turkey hunters who purchase a turkey transport tag to hunt turkeys in spring 2021 must report the results of their hunt by Jan. 31, 2022. Hunters can submit reports online at [WDFW Wild 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, populations of this species appear to be growing and expanding in their 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. It is recommended that interested hunters 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 two, single-day surveys in July 2020 at historic mineral sites in Skagit and Whatcom counties to monitor changes in the local breeding population. These surveys allow biologists to anticipate trends in the regional population. However, the open season (Sept. 15–23) usually corresponds 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 with band-tailed pigeon harvest report card are required, and the daily limit is two (2) birds with a six (6) bird possession limit. 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 a strong attraction 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 on Sept. 26, 2020, in Western Washington, and Oct. 3, 2020, in Eastern Washington. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt. Please refer to page 11 of the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Regulations](#) pamphlet.

**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 on Feb. 6, 2021. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt.

## **DABBLING DUCKS**

According to 10-year average data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual [National Migratory Bird Harvest Survey](#), Skagit County boasts second in the state and 36<sup>th</sup> out of the 3,115 surveyed U.S. counties, while Whatcom County ranks <sup>seventh</sup> in the state and 137<sup>th</sup>

nationwide for waterfowl harvest. During the 2019-20 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 2018-19 duck harvest for neighboring Whatcom County was 17,359 birds, down 37% from the five-year average, which could also be credited to the 19% decline in hunter participation.

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 Planner Web map](#). The web map is a tool that provides information on Washington's 2020–2021 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

Average winter precipitation this year and a very wet and cool spring left ample breeding habitat for ducks in Washington and British Columbia. Unfortunately, agency staff were unable to perform breeding surveys due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, weather conditions point towards good to great local breeding. Fire reports in Alaska also suggest that breeding areas are wetter than usual. We anticipate an abundant number of birds in the area this season.

Early season hunting opportunities in District 14 are generally 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, then large numbers of northern breeding ducks start to arrive in late October and November.

Bag and possession limits for Northern pintail were decreased last year from a 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. This bag limit will continue for the 2020–21 season.

Please be sure to get the appropriate authorizations and harvest record cards required for the species/areas you are pursuing waterfowl. For information, refer to the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Regulations](#) pamphlet. Authorizations and harvest record cards are available at WDFW license dealers or online using [WDFW's Wild System](#). Hunters must select each of the required harvest record cards for species they intend to hunt.

## SEA DUCKS

For those pursuing intertidal and saltwater areas for sea ducks and diving ducks, public boat ramps can be found 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 has been said to greatly improve both hunting options and success.

Like some dabbling ducks, all sea ducks have their own species-specific daily bag limit which can make up the total seven (7) bird bag limit. In western Washington, the daily bag limit is one (1) Harlequin (only one Harlequin may be taken per person during the season), two (2) scaup, two (2) scoter, two (2) long-tailed duck, two (2) canvasback, two (2) redhead, and two (2) goldeneye. Refer to page 19 in the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Regulations](#) pamphlet for more details. Immediately after taking a scoter, long-tailed duck, harlequin, or a goldeneye) in western Washington, a hunter must fill out their harvest card information in ink.



*Harlequin ducks (Photo credit: Ryan Askren)*

## **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 and are referred to as gray-bellies. Because of their limited nesting and wintering grounds, this population is vulnerable to excessive harvest. To prevent overharvest, aerial surveys of the wintering population are flown to determine a wintering population estimate. In the past, this estimate dictated whether there was a six-day season (if more than 6,000 birds were counted), a three-day season (between 3,000–6,000 birds), or no season at all (under 3,000 birds). Last year the agency established a guaranteed two-day season for Skagit County. This will continue this year, but the dates have been split to optimize the potential for favorable weather. The Skagit county brant season will take place on Jan. 16 and 23. Additional season dates, if any, will be determined by the aerial survey results. Season updates will be provided by a WDFW news release. 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>.

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, 2021. Data obtained from these reports are important for managing this species.



*Harvested black brant (Photo credit: Robert Waddell)*

## **CANADA GEESE**

Skagit County bodes the fourth-highest Canada goose harvest in Washington and the highest harvest west of the Cascades. This year, the September Canada goose season will occur Sept. 5–10 and offers early season hunting opportunities for hunters in both Skagit (Goose Management Area 1) and Whatcom (Goose Management Area 3; see page 24 of the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Regulations](#) pamphlet for more detailed information about Goose Management Areas). During this early season, bag limits are five (5) per day, with a possession limit of 15. Higher limits are in place because early seasons are used to target and decrease the population of resident birds, while later seasons see an influx of migrant geese.



*Photo credit: Greg Green*

Regular goose season dates are different for Skagit and Whatcom Counties and are based on their respective Goose Management Zone (see page 24 of the [Washington 2020 Game Bird and Small Game Regulations](#) pamphlet). Possession bag limits during this season decrease to four (4) per day, with a possession limit of 12 birds.

### **LESSER SNOW GEESE**

Snow goose hunting is another mainstay of waterfowl hunting in District 14 and provides a very different alternative to hunting dabbling ducks. The liberal bag limit of six (6) 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.

Unfortunately, the winter survey could not be flown during the 2019–20 season, but instead, a minimum ground count was collected by biologists.

Harvest of snow geese in this area from the Washington component of this population last season were up and were dominated by a high juvenile ratio, making early season very exciting for many hunters until the young birds smartened up. Conditions on the breeding grounds this spring indicate favorable breeding conditions. Last year's juveniles won't be sexually mature until next year, which might produce another bumper year for juvenile birds in the 2021–22 season if weather conditions are good and predator abundance is low on the breeding grounds.

White geese are adapting to the changing land use and crop conditions in Skagit and Whatcom counties, which has had an impact on their overall distribution. The area's newest flock, found around Edison, emerged within the past five years and has grown sustainably and at times splits

into two separate flocks. These trends support a continued increase in opportunity and harvest this year as human-geese conflict, particularly in agricultural areas, continues to grow.



*Photo credit: Callie Moore*



*Photo credit: Callie Moore*

Hunters interested in harvesting snow geese should seek 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 home range 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 tend to 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.

## Swans Are Protected - Closed Statewide



No changes have been made to this year's season structure for white geese (Lesser Snow, Ross', and Blue Geese) in Goose Management Area 1 (Skagit and Snohomish Counties). Like last year, the 2020–21 season will include a late hunting season for white goose only from Feb. 13–23, 2021. One closure will be observed during the season from Nov. 30–Dec. 11, to allow for the February hunt. All normal regulations regarding plugged shotguns, non-motorized decoys, and bag limits apply during both seasons. The 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 24 in the [Washington Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#)). The bag limit for white geese is six birds, with a possession limit of 18. The WDFW Private Lands Access program will be partnering with private landowners to provide increased public access on private lands for this late season goose opportunity.



*Photo credit: Maynard Axelson*

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 Planner Web map](#). The web map is a tool that provides information on Washington's hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, as well as roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

## HUNTER ACCESS

Access on private lands for big game hunting opportunities remains limited. Because of experience with theft, vandalism, dumping, and other problems, private industrial timber companies generally do not allow vehicular access. Many limit access to walk-in only, while some do not allow access of any kind. With less hunting pressure, this can result in good hunting opportunities for those willing to use bicycles or hike behind locked gates when access of this type is allowed.

One exception to this is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns significant private industrial timberlands in Skagit and Whatcom counties. For the 2020–21 season, WDFW has facilitated access on Sierra Pacific properties in GMU 418 for special permit bull elk, some quality black-tailed buck permit holders, and permit spring bear hunters.

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

Because much of the land in District 14 is private property, hunters should obtain permission to hunt from landowners and be 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 land ownership and understand local 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 2020, 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 almost 60 sites available 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 (note that 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 whoever books the reservation. To make a reservation on 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 can be made beginning at 8 a.m., two weeks prior to the hunt day. 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 South Padilla Bay (Bayview 1, 2, and 3) and Samish River (Edison East and West) parcels managed by Skagit Wildlife Area.

## PUBLIC LANDS

Vehicle access by big game hunters to certain Washington Department of Natural Resource (DNR) lands in Skagit and Whatcom Counties may be impacted by logging activities during the upcoming hunting season. Access to 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 the use of vehicles, hunters are allowed access to these areas on foot, mountain bike, or by horse.

USFS lands offer some vehicular access throughout Whatcom and Skagit counties. Many road systems have been closed due to flood-related damage, and some roads are subject to seasonal road closures. USFS is currently in a planning process to decommission or abandon a significant portion of its managed road network on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. Ultimately, this will further restrict vehicular access to upper elevation habitats for big game and forest grouse hunting.

Among the WDFW-owned and managed lands in District 14, waterfowl hunters should consider the Headquarters, Island, Samish (also known as the Welts property), and Johnson/Debay's Slough units in Skagit County and Tennant Lake and Lake Terrell wildlife areas in Whatcom County. All these sites are managed for waterfowl and provide walk-in and/or boat access. Some blinds are also available. Hunters can visit the WDFW [Wildlife Areas](#) webpage and search WDFW wildlife areas and units by name, county, and region for more information on each location.

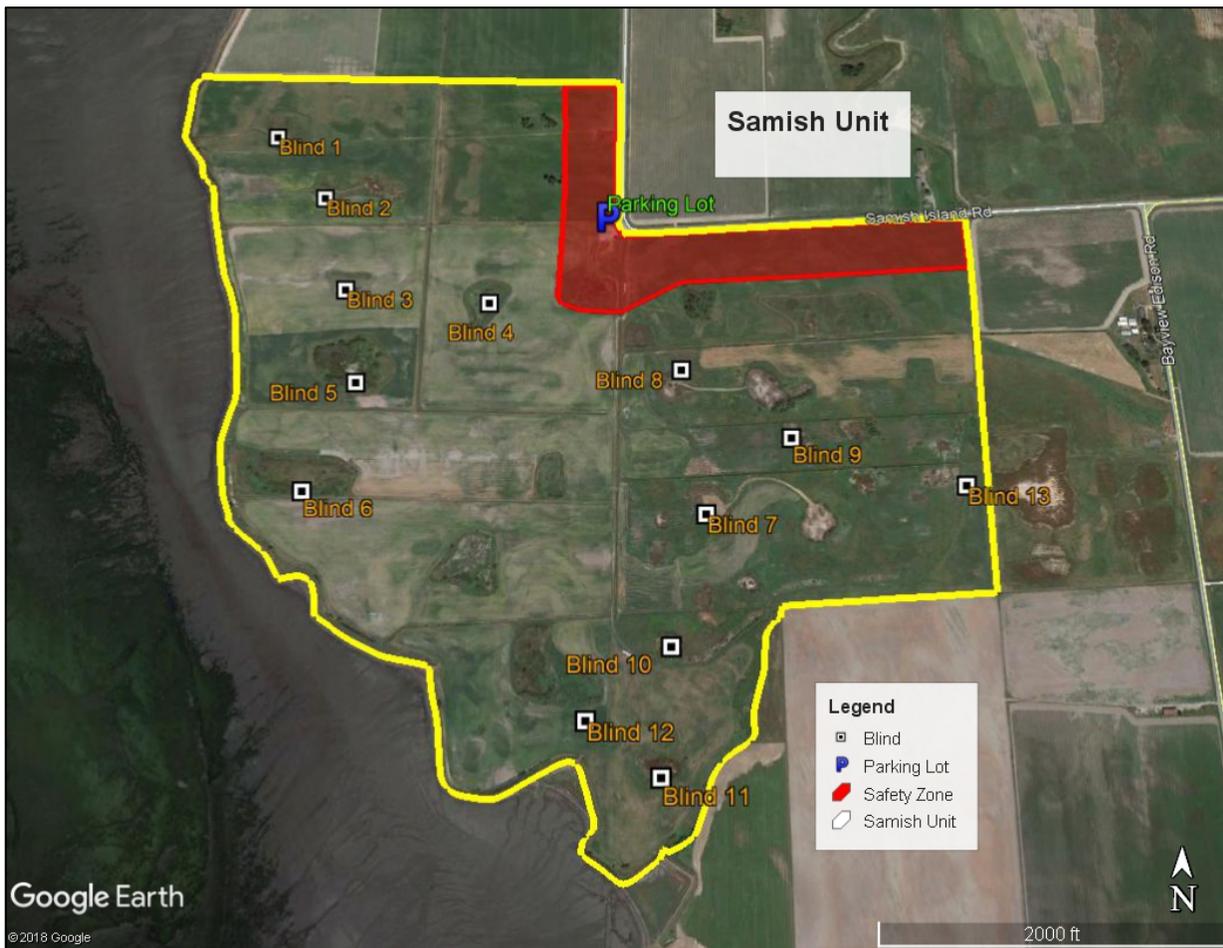
## ISLAND UNIT

This unit is 250 total acres, with approximately 110 acres planted to 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.



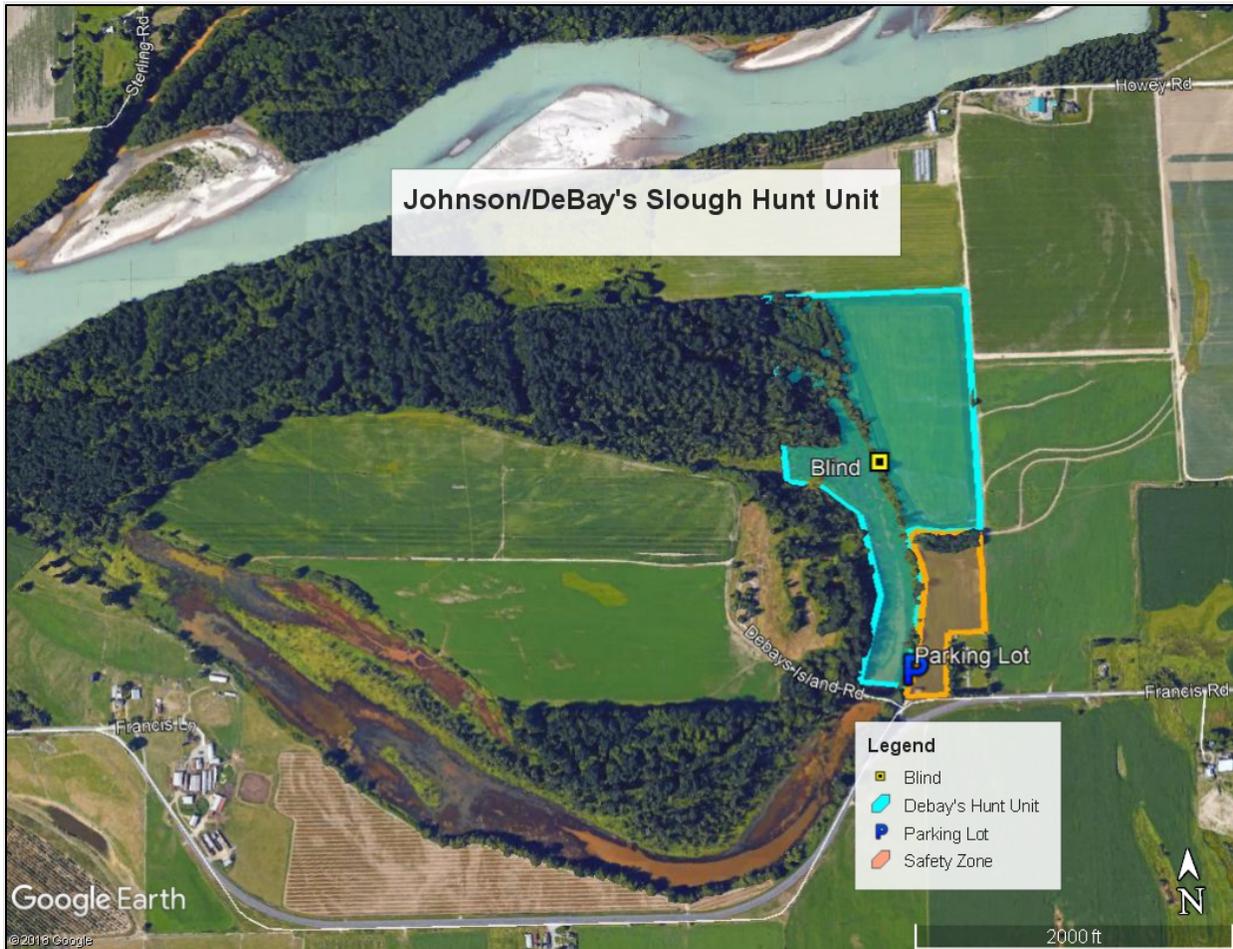
## SAMISH UNIT

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. Because this is a field hunting site, it 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 towards Stanwood along the north shore of Camano Island or the South Bay area. A large portion of the first- and second-class tidelands in this area are owned by WDFW (approximately 16,000 acres), with private ownerships interspersed. The property provides prime waterfowl hunting from a boat or by foot during low tides. WDFW manages two Game Reserves in this area, Skagit Bay Delta and Fir Island Farm Reserves.



*Fir Island Farm Reserve (Photo credit: Robert Waddell)*

The Skagit Bay topography is quite diverse and includes open saltwater, mudflats, 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.



## LAKE TERRELL UNIT

The Lake Terrell unit of the Whatcom Wildlife Area is an important and productive waterfowl hunting site. This unit has over 15 permanently constructed hunting blinds on the lake which are all first-come, first-served. One ADA accessible hunting blind (photo below) was constructed by the Whatcom County Chapter of the Washington Waterfowl Association and is available for reservation by calling the Whatcom Wildlife Area Manager, Richard Kessler, at 360-739-3404.



*Photo credit: Richard Kessler*

## TENNANT LAKE UNIT

The Tennant Lake unit of the Whatcom Wildlife Area has three waterfowl hunting blinds that are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Hunters can sign-in on the day of the hunt at the sign-in box located at the top boat launch to let others know which blind they will be using. This site is reliably productive throughout the hunting season.



*Photo credit: Richard Kessler*

## **NOOKSACK UNIT**

The Nooksack unit is located south of Slater Road at the Nooksack River and is heavily used during the waterfowl hunting season. At the north end of the unit is a 120-acre agricultural field that is planted in corn during the spring. Upon harvest, 10% of the corn crop is left standing to provide winter forage for waterfowl, providing for a high-quality hunting area. There are several permanent hunting blinds and temporary stand-up blinds located within the standing corn. All blinds are first-come, first-served.



*Photo credit: Richard Kessler*