

2020

JEFF BERNATOWICZ, District Wildlife  
Biologist



Washington  
Department of  
**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**



## DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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## DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in southcentral Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teanaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali), and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrub steppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is probably best known for great elk hunting. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 8,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are about 4,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunities in District 8. Yakima County is near the top for harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove and chukar, #3 for pheasant, #4 for duck, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many options in District 8. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the freeway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which utilizes a Hunt by Reservation system. West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000-acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys were introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teanaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent turkey hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in Washington. While it is still challenging to draw a permit to hunt sheep, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip in District 8. Rams are in rut mid-October through November when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

**Important Access Changes:** Due to low elk populations and poor recruitment, early archery antlerless general seasons have largely been eliminated. GMUs 334 and 335 are still open to archery general but hold few elk.

The Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg recently went to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits via the Hunt by Reservation system.

The Master Hunter Antlerless elk season in GMU 371 now ends Oct. 15. About 1,000 acres of land that had been open to Master Hunters in the 3911 Park Creek area has changed ownership and is now closed to access. The new landowner will prosecute trespassers, so it is important to know where you are, and make sure you have permission to be on that property.

As of late July, the YTC Gym was open for hunter registration, but doors were locked. Hunters needed to call 509-577-3208 to reach the front desk and gain access. Due to COVID-19, access to the Yakima Training Center (YTC) is likely to change periodically with risk. A Washington driver's license is still required to drive onto the post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification required. For more information on approved form of identification, orientation, and other rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

## ELK



District 8 used to be arguably the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are

looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader.

The only antlerless Archery general seasons are now in GMU's 334 and 335. Both units are managed for minimal numbers of elk due to adjacent agriculture. Elk Area 3911 covers all of GMU 334 and the lower portions of GMU 335 where most elk reside. Master Hunters are allowed to harvest antlerless elk using modern firearms from August 1 –Jan. 20 in 3911, so any archery hunters hunting in Elk Area 3911 should be aware they are required to wear hunter orange. Recent archery harvest has been about 9 from GMU 335 and 3 from GMU 334.

The reason for the changes is that both the Yakima and Colockum elk herds are below objectives and declining due to poor recruitment. Surveys this past winter found the Colockum herd was around 3,800 elk. Just a few years ago, the Colockum herd was over 6,000 during March surveys. The Yakima herd was not surveyed, but calf recruitment (19 calves per 100 cows) on the feed sites was the lowest ever recorded.

Modern firearm and muzzleloader elk hunting general season success in this district strongly correlates to the number of calves seen in late winter, as those are the spikes available for harvest in fall. With low total calf recruitment, there will be relatively few spikes available for harvest. Harvest and success are expected to be below that observed in the last few years (Figure 1, Table 1). The lack of recruitment is also greatly impacting both branched bull and antlerless permitting. Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October, whereas Figure 3 is from a recent study on Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads once seasons begin. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide some of the better opportunities in the District for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country away from roads.

**Figure 1.** District 8 elk harvest

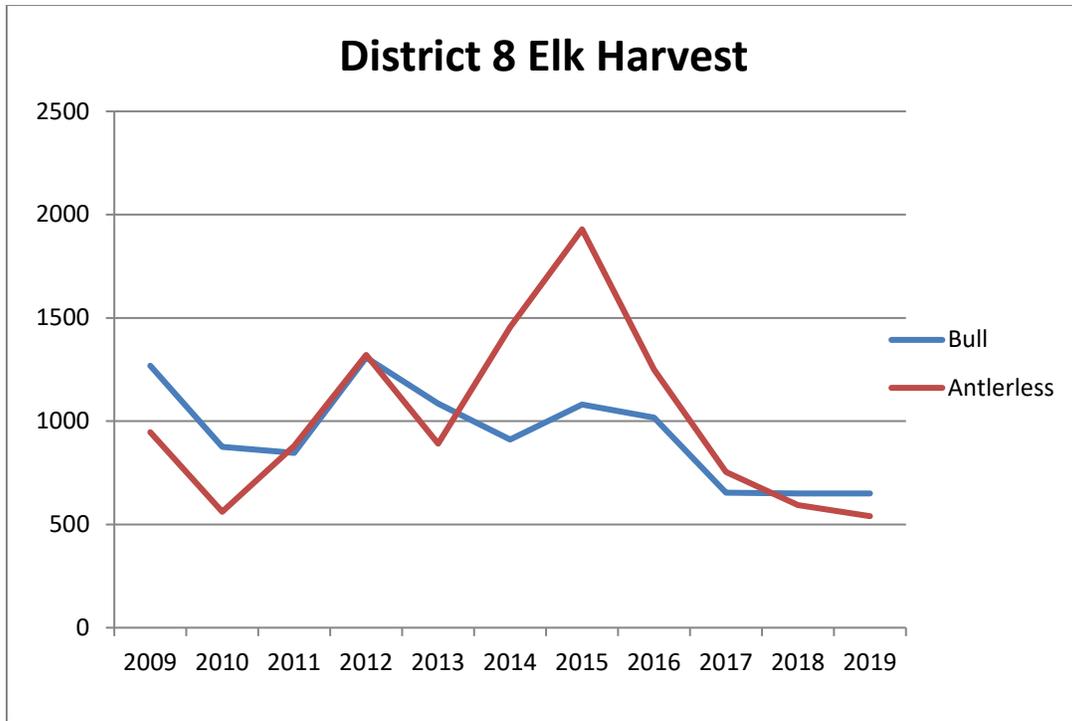


Table 1: Elk General Season Average 2017-19

GMU	Antlerle		Total	Hunt	Succe
	ss	Spike			
328	178	108	287	3419	8%
329	43	91	134	1663	8%
334	12	9	21	367	6%
335	19	9	28	698	4%
336	18	15	33	1176	3%
340	10	46	57	2125	3%
342	13	24	37	1482	2%
346	6	45	51	1612	3%
352	56	23	79	1567	5%
356	27	26	53	1193	4%
360	0	40	40	1349	3%
364	32	17	49	1106	4%
368	37	69	106	1782	6%
				1953	
Total	452	522	974	9	5%

Figure 2

### A Sample of Yakima Elk Herd's Fall Distribution from 140 Collared Females during Sept. & Oct. 2004 - 2006

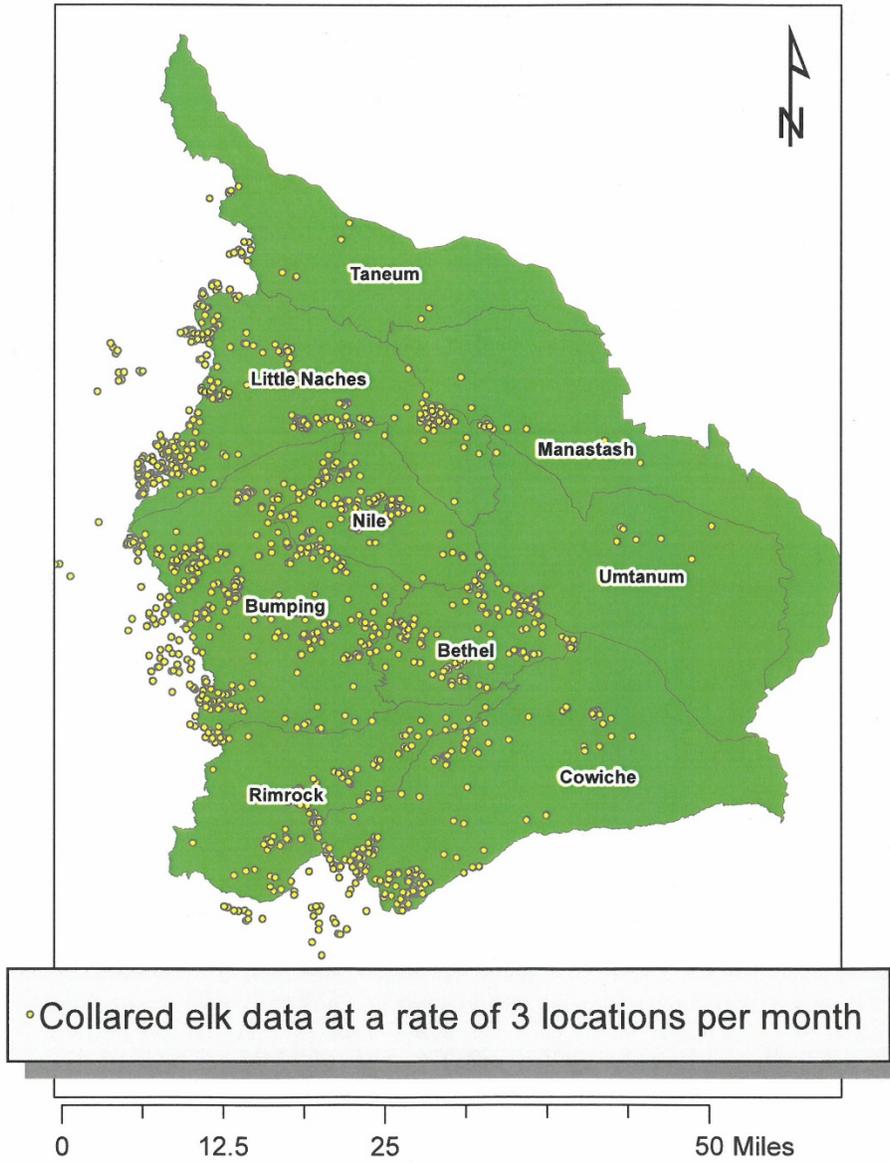
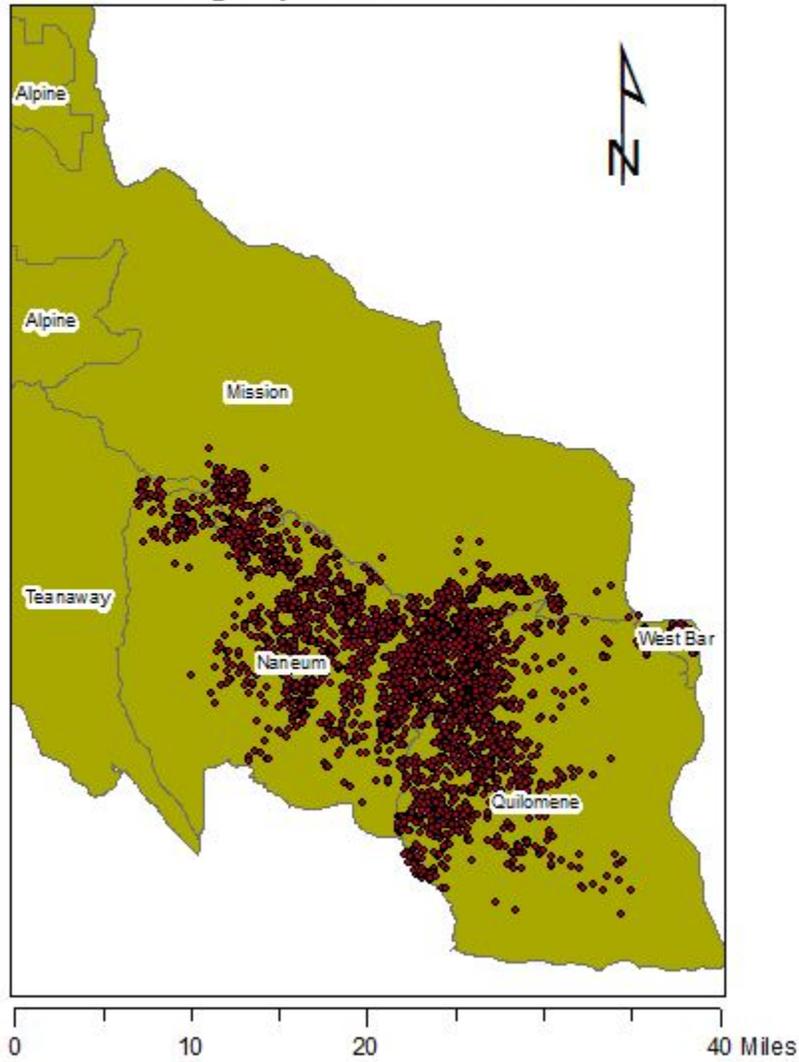


Figure 3

**Colockum Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations during September & October**



## DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 hit its lowest levels in 2018 since records have been maintained (Figure 4) but rebounded slightly in 2019. The average general season hunter's success is about 6% compared to a statewide average of 23%. No major increase is expected for 2020. Last winter was mild, but spring population surveys indicated deer populations remained relatively unchanged. Harvest and hunter numbers by GMU for the last three years are shown in Table 2.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teaway), 328 (Naneum), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

**Figure 4.** District 8 buck harvest.

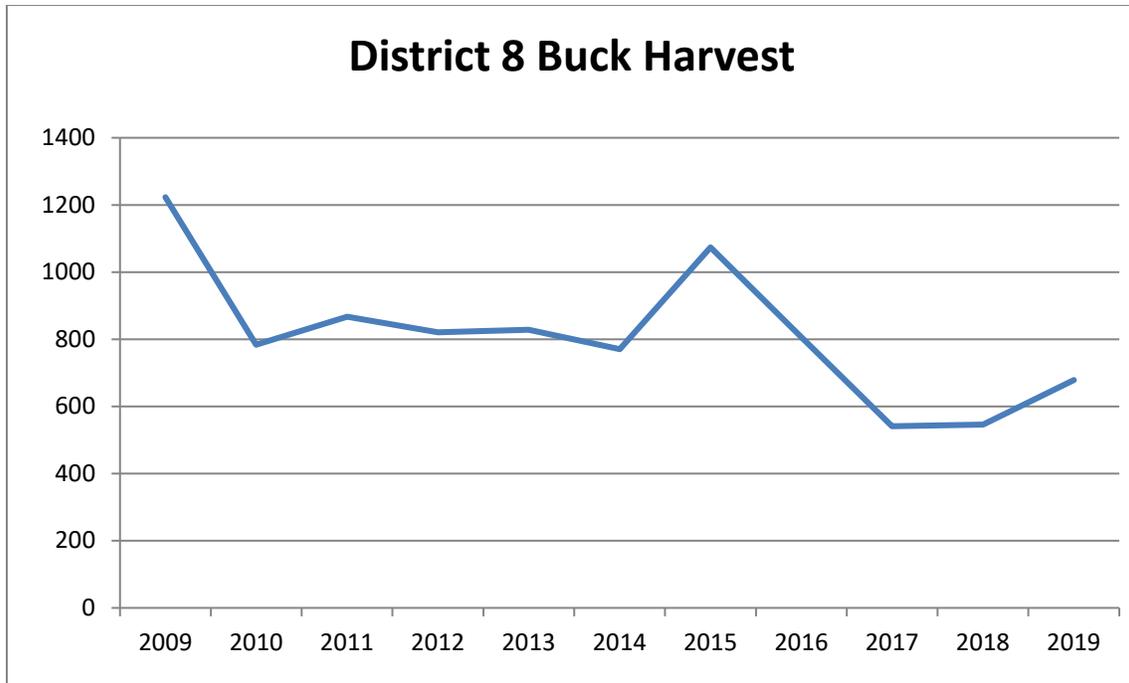


Table 2: District 8 General Season Deer Average 2017-19

GMU	Buck Harvest	Hunters	Success
328	94	1311	7%
330	2	17	12%
334	17	311	6%
335	129	1343	10%
336	36	783	5%
340	79	1169	7%
342	77	1018	8%
346	18	692	3%
352	20	623	3%
356	7	330	2%
360	5	440	1%
364	7	398	2%
368	45	1107	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>535</b>	<b>9543</b>	<b>6%</b>

## COUGAR

The majority of cougars in the district are harvested by deer and elk hunters who opportunistically cross paths with a cat during general deer/elk seasons and have a cougar tag in their pocket. However, more hunters are finding that cougar hunting is a fun and challenging experience. The early season is open September 1 – December 31. The late season starts January 1 and continues until harvest guidelines are reached (seasons close April 1). Male cougars are territorial and use a broader range when deer and elk are dispersed in summer and early fall. Deer and elk typically migrate back to the winter range by mid-November. Cougars will follow, and the highest cat densities can be found during late fall and winter in lower elevations. One popular hunting technique is to use calls. This is most successful when there is snow on the ground and tracks can be found. Rather than following the cougar hoping to “run it down”, hunters call, trying to get the cat to come to them. A number of calls work. During deer and elk seasons, hunters might consider a fawn bleat call, which typically won’t spook deer or elk. Without snow, it can be difficult to know where to start. Rather than working large blocks of timber, consider timbered stringers. Cougars inhabit open terrain but prefer cover. Cats hunting open shrub-steppe will likely be hiding in timber stringers during the day. Cougars inhabit nearly every portion of the district, but some online hunting groups post where cats have been seen recently. Checking those sites may improve your success.

## WATERFOWL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) did not fly breeding population estimates in 2020. Since 2014, estimates for the flyway had been above the long-term average, but declining in recent years. Harvest in District 8 has been relatively stable around 30,000 since 2013 (Figure 5). For local hunters, total ducks in the flyway probably is not as important as local weather conditions and available food. As row crops like corn convert to hops, orchard, and vineyard, duck numbers in the District are expected to decline.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley, especially on the Yakama Nation (YN) lands. The Yakama Nation is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their Feel Free to Hunt map annually (<https://www.ynwildlife.org/>), use Google Earth to pre-scout, and don’t be afraid to explore. YN’s Satus Wildlife Area is the most popular and is open to hunting Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday, and holidays. The main Satus Wildlife Area is very popular due to relatively easy access. Hunting can be just as good on Mosebar ponds and north Satus.

Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). The Sunnyside Wildlife Area has struggled with dense

vegetation and low water in recent years. Harvest and hunters days on Sunnyside have been fairly low. The Johnson unit can be good hunting if there is water...which there hasn't been for a few years. Before making a trip, check with the Wildlife area staff (509-837-7644) on current conditions.

Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge has also had difficulty filling wetlands, especially in October. Water cannot be pumped from Toppenish to fill wetlands in the Robins Unit unless flows are greater than 30 cubic feet per second. The Pumphouse wetlands are dependent on Toppenish Creek side channels to fill at higher creek levels. Flows in those side channels have been a bit unpredictable in recent years. It appears that at a gauge height of 3 feet, the channels should fill. Hunters can check flow/levels at <https://waterdata.usgs.gov/wa/nwis/uv/>. Summer 2020 has been dry and creek flows are low. If significant rain does not fall, don't expect water in the refuge until sometime in November. Before making a trip to Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. This past spring was fairly dry, but the hatch at this time is not known.

Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best late-season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see Let's Go Waterfowling.

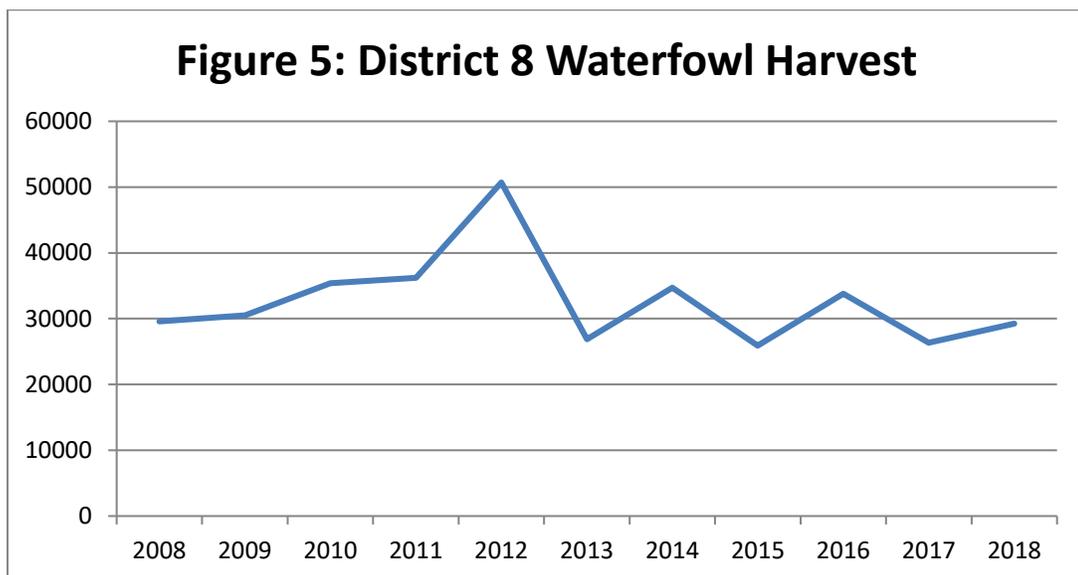


Figure 5. District 8 waterfowl harvest.

## DOVE

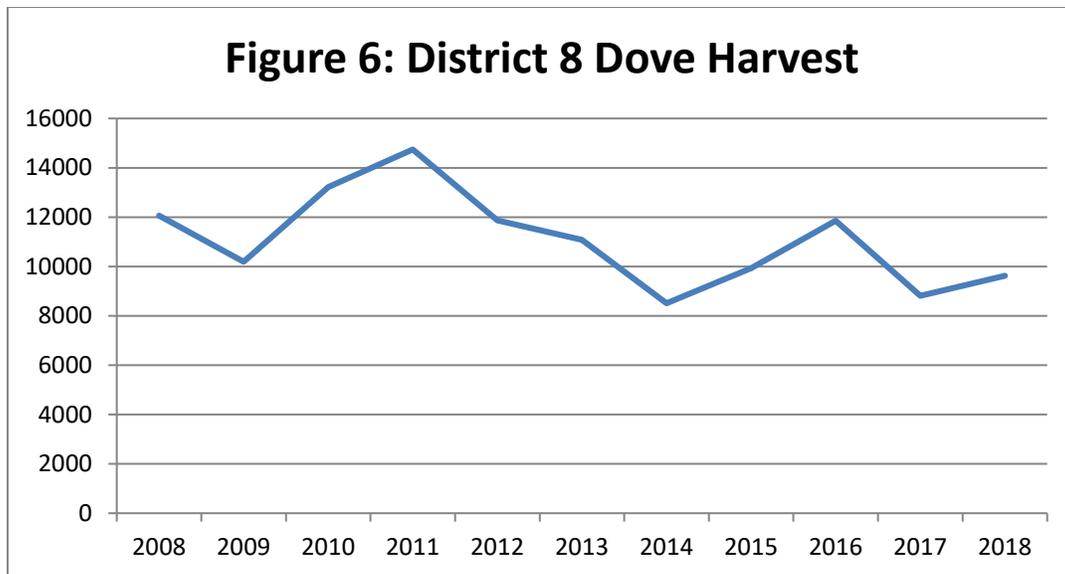
Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. Harvest has generally been declining for the past 10 years (Figure 6). The 2020 hatch is not known. Doves typically build flimsy nests that blow out easily. Spring and early summer 2020 were exceptionally windy, so the expectation was for another bad hatch. However, early banding has indicated a better hatch than was expected.

The best success in the lower Yakima Valley is on private land. The better public hunting can be found on the Yakima Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting on Yakama Nation land, visit [ynwildlife.org](http://ynwildlife.org).

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area has public dove hunting, but registration boxes suggest relatively poor harvest the last 3 years. Hunters typically average <1 bird per day. Attempts were made to improve hunting in 2017 by mowing weeds/unsuccessful food plots. As soon as doves concentrated, raptors arrived and dispersed the doves. Large dove concentrations quickly dispersing has been seen frequently while banding. This suggests hunters should locate numerous fields and scout only a day or 2 before the season.

Dove numbers in the area often depend on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunities, as the season extends year-round, without bag limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically, then there was a die-off in 2018-19, probably due to Avian Paramyxovirus-1. The virus was widespread nationwide in Eurasian collared doves, and populations have not rebounded. No information is collected on collared dove harvest nor are there surveys. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to behave more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunities at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.



**Figure 6.** District 8 dove harvest.

## FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 has been fairly stable over the last seven years (Figure 7) despite fewer hunters and days reported. Harvest data is not available for 2019 other than from wing-barrels, which suggested a decreased harvest. No data are available on the 2020 hatch, but there was no unusual weather in the Mountains. The vast majority of harvest has been on Blue Grouse.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

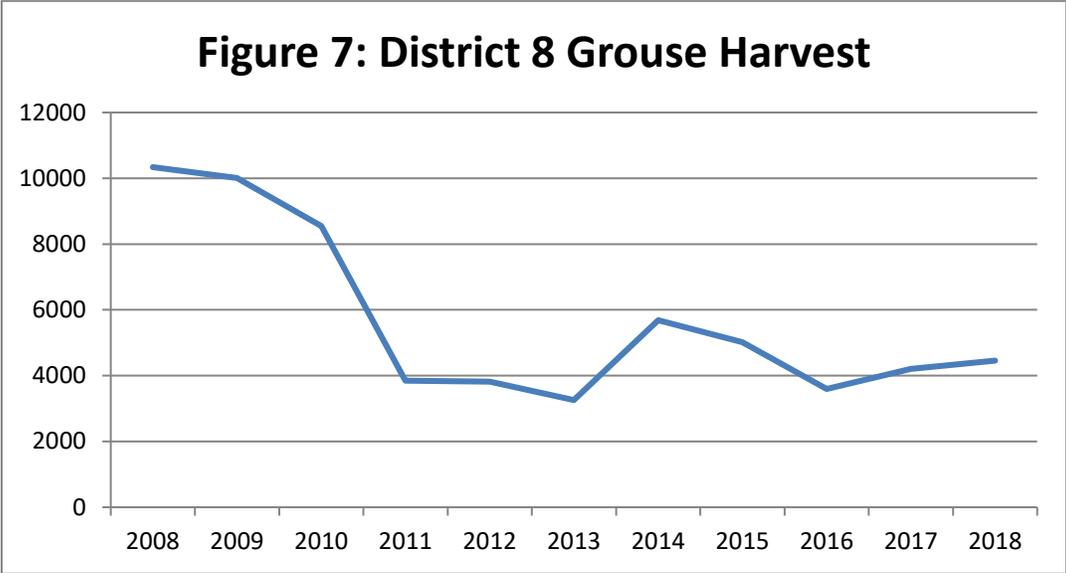


Figure 7. District 8 grouse harvest.

## PHEASANT

Pheasant harvest in District 8 has leveled out at very low levels due to consistently few wild birds (Figure 8). The only place to find huntable numbers of wild birds is on the Yakama Nation Reservation (YN). Pheasant numbers have been declining for decades on YN due to conversion from fallow land to crops. There has been no change in this trend. Even if grain prices declined, farmers would switch to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle. A compounding negative factor is the conversion to hops and orchard.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult. No significant snow fell in 2019-2020 and spring was dry. Snow and spring rain often increase soil moisture and results in a good hatch. Irrigation water can make up for dry conditions where it seeps into weed patches. Wild pheasant probably contribute little to the total harvest in the district. The best guess is that pockets of wild birds probably remained stable.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. Yakama Nation has historically conducted production surveys, but they did not post 2019 results, and it is unknown if surveys were completed in 2020. For information on surveys and hunting the Yakama Nation Reservation, visit [ynwildlife.org](http://ynwildlife.org).

Released pen-raised pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 1,600 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2020 allocation will be about 800 birds at the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 500 at Cottonwoods, and 300 at Whiskey Dick. A fire burned the eastern portion of the Cottonwoods release site in 2019. The cover is returning, but attempts will be made to get birds in the better cover off of the Durr Road and pointed west.

For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. Historically, turnout in September had been low, and kids have had a difficult time finding released birds. In the last few years, WDFW switched to mentored hunts and releasing when kids arrive on Saturday morning. Volunteers from the local chapter of Pheasants Forever run the events. During school breaks, there have been clinics for first-time hunters. Due to COVID-19, it is unknown if the clinics will take place this year.

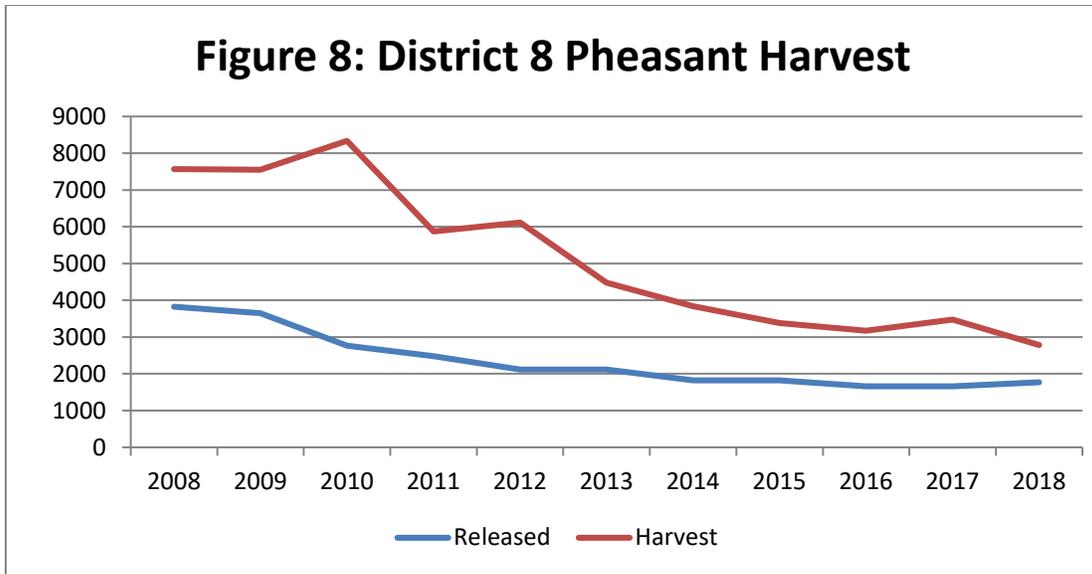


Figure 8. District 8 pheasant harvest.

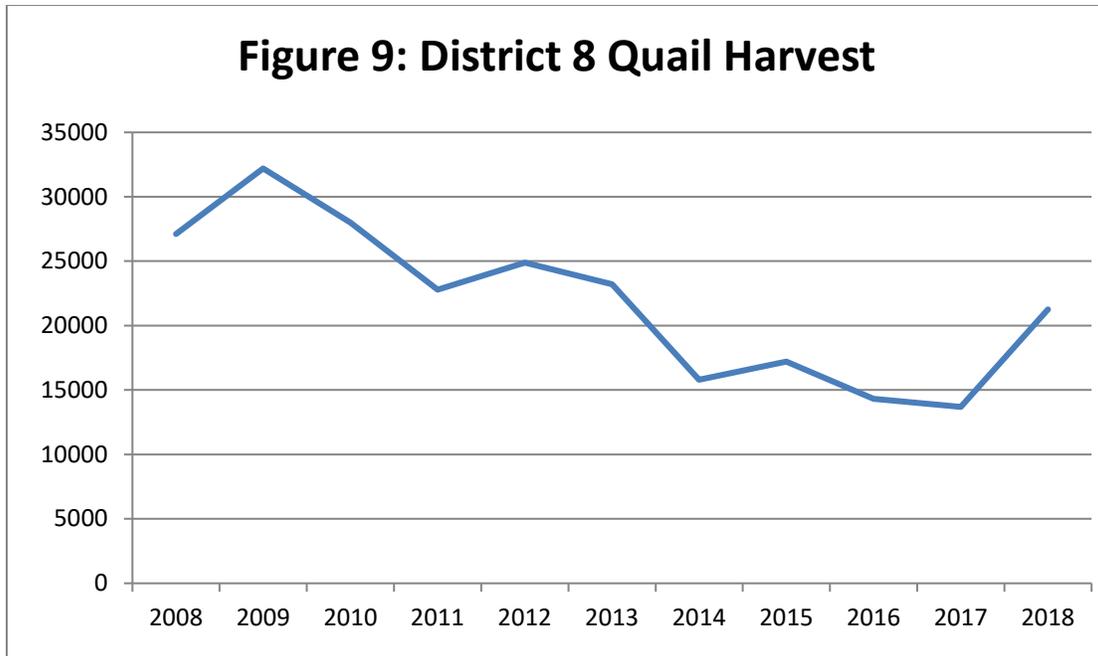
## QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail are typically in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 15,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 1,900.

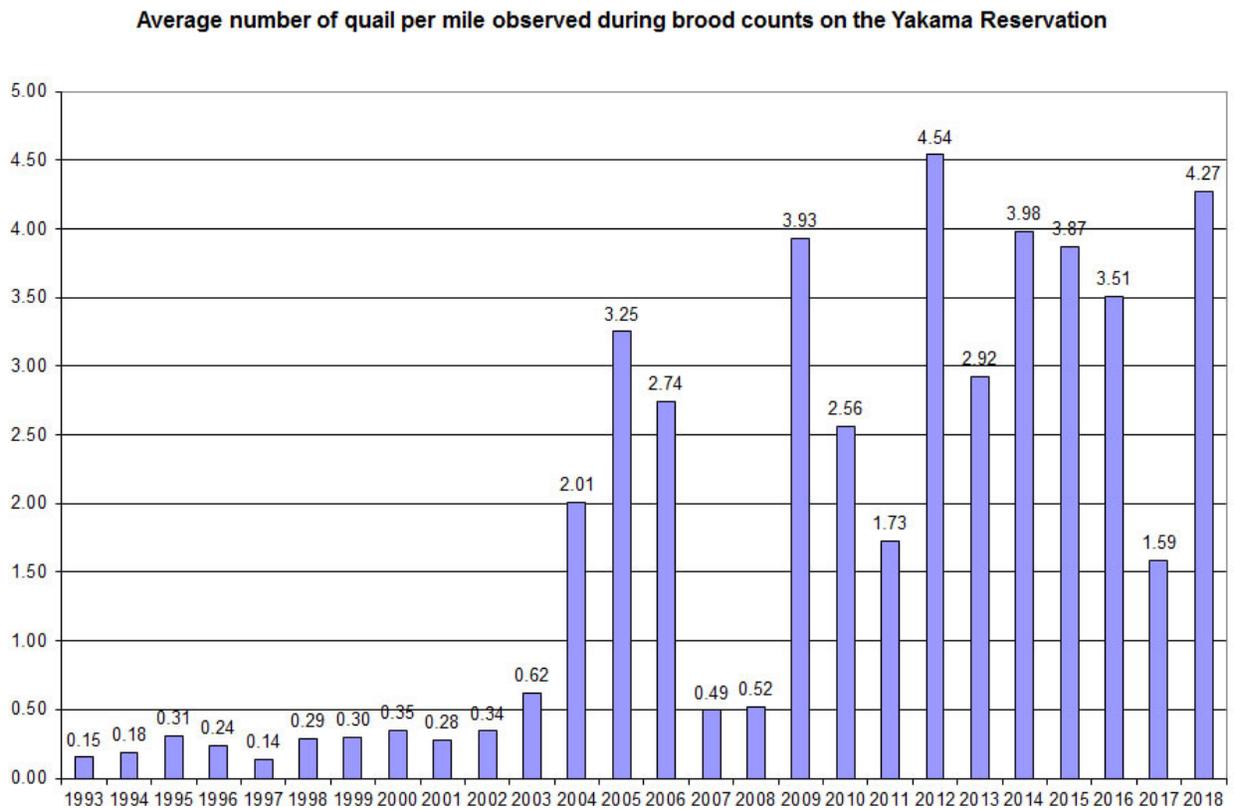
The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 9). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the Yakama Nation Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds until the winter of 2016-17 reduced the populations (Figure 10). There was a rebound in 2018, but not universally. Quail numbers in some of the historically best areas along the Yakima River failed to increase significantly. Instead, pockets of birds that survived 2016-17 near homes, feedlots, and grain fields were the places to hunt 2018 and 2019. No harvest estimate is available for 2019.

The quail population should have increased 2019-2020. No significant snow fell, but spring/summer was fairly dry. Areas near good riparian habitat should have had good hatches. Areas near artificial food sources (houses, cattle feedlots) have the highest probability of good bird numbers, as bird survival was higher in previous winters.

WDFW owns various parcels along the lower Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunities. For information on surveys and hunting Yakama Nation land, visit [ynwildlife.org](http://ynwildlife.org).



**Figure 9.** District 8 quail harvest.

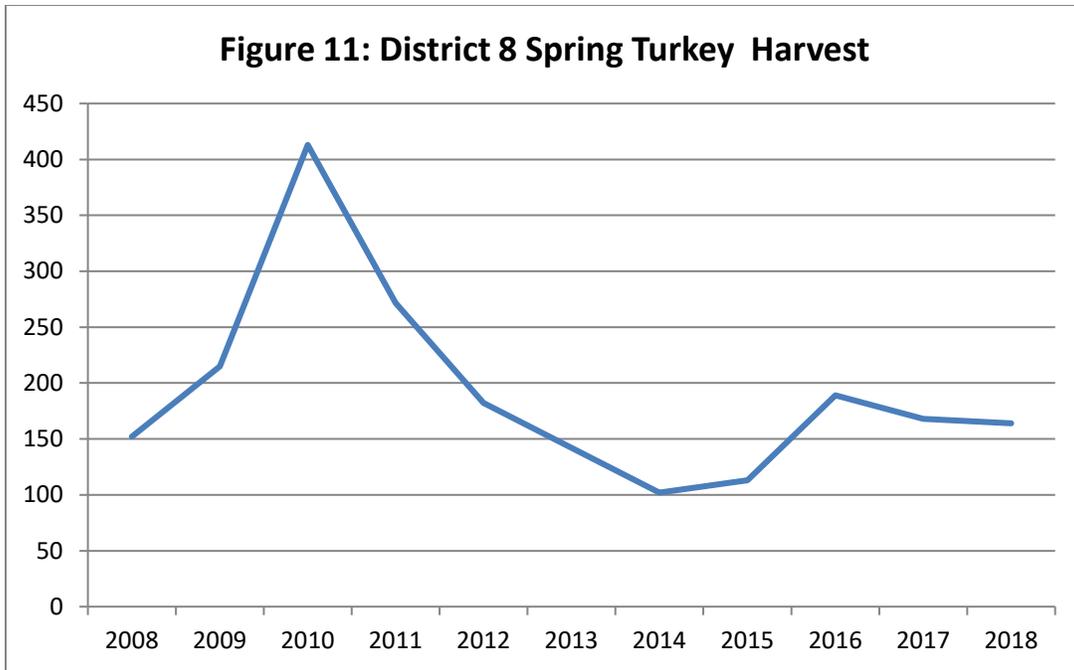


**Figure 10.** Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Nation Reservation.

## TURKEY



Turkey populations peaked in 2010 following releases in the late 1990s and appear to have settled at lower levels (Figure 11). About 50 percent of the district harvest typically comes from GMU 335 (Teaway). The best hunting early in the spring is on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teaway Community Forest. GMUs 328 and 329 sometimes produce a decent (>20 birds) harvest. Outside of those areas, turkeys are in very small pockets. Fewer than 10 birds are typically harvested annually in any of the 340-372 GMUs.



**Figure 11.** District 8 spring turkey harvest.

## PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been increasing since 2014 despite very hard winters in 2015-16 and 2017-18 (Figure 12). History has shown that abundant snow and a wet, cold spring produces a lot of vegetation and birds. There are few 3-year-old game birds, so the population is composed primarily of hatch-year birds. Even when it seems most birds died in the winter, they rebound very quickly as melting snow improves soil moisture.

Little information is available on the 2020 hatch and harvest data were not available for 2019 at this writing. The main concern for 2020 is the lack of winter snow and spring rain. Soil moisture was low, south slopes failed to green-up, and forbs were noticeably absent. There were still some good reports of birds in wet draws on the Quilomene and Colockum Wildlife areas. Points further west in the district had better snow and spring moisture than points east.

The Yakima Training Center is very popular with long-time chukar hunters. Access should be good in 2020 as training activity has been curtailed due to COVID-19. Note the access information in the “Overview” portion of this document.

**Figure 12.** District 8 chukar/hun harvest

**Figure 12: District 8 Chukar/Hun Harvest**

