

2024 District 15 Hunting Prospects

Mason, Kitsap, and east Jefferson counties



Washington
Department of
**FISH &
WILDLIFE**

September 2024

2024 District 15 Hunting Prospects

Mason, Kitsap, and east Jefferson counties

Author

Bryan L. Murphie, District Wildlife Biologist

Cover photo by Bryan Murphie.

Request this information in an alternative format or language at [wdfw.wa.gov/accessibility/requests-accommodation](https://www.wdfw.wa.gov/accessibility/requests-accommodation), 833-885-1012, TTY (711), or CivilRightsTeam@dfw.wa.gov.

Table of Contents

District 15 general overview	4
Elk	4
General information, management objectives, and population status.....	4
Which GMU should elk hunters hunt?.....	5
What to expect during the 2024 season	6
Elk areas	7
Notable hunting changes	7
Deer	8
General information, management goals, and population status.....	8
Which GMU should deer hunters hunt?.....	8
What to expect during the 2024 season.....	8
Deer areas	9
Notable hunting changes	9
Black bear	13
General information, management goals, and population status.....	13
What to expect during the 2024 season.....	13
Notable hunting changes	13
Cougar	15
General information, management goals, and population status.....	15
What to expect during the 2024 season.....	15
Notable hunting changes	15
Mountain goat	16
General information, management goals, and population status.....	16
Notable hunting changes	17
Ducks	17
Common species	17
Population status and 2024 prospects.....	17
Public land opportunities.....	17
Notable hunting changes	17
Geese	18
Common species	18
Population status and 2024 prospects.....	18
Public land opportunities.....	18
Forest grouse	18

General information and population status	18
Harvest trends.....	19
Notable hunting changes	21
Band-tailed pigeons	21
General description.....	21
Population status and harvest	21
Where and how to hunt band-tailed pigeons.....	22
Notable hunting changes	22
Pheasants.....	22
Quail	22
Turkey	22
Other small game species.....	23
General overview of hunter access in each GMU.....	23
GMU 621 (Olympic).....	23
GMU 624 (Coyle).....	23
GMU 627 (Kitsap).....	24
GMU 633 (Mason).....	24
GMU 636 (Skokomish)	24
GMU 651 (Satsop).....	24
Private Lands Access Program	24
Public land resources	25
Online tools and maps	25
WDFW’s hunting regulations web map	25

District 15 general overview

District 15 includes Mason, Kitsap, and the eastern part of Jefferson counties, and is one of four districts (11, 15, 16, and 17) that constitute the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's (WDFW) Coastal Region, or Region 6. District 15 consists of all or portions of six game management units (GMUs): 621 (Olympic), 624 (Coyle), 627 (Kitsap), 633 (Mason), 636 (Skokomish), and 651 (Satsop). A portion of GMUs 621 and 624 fall within District 16. A portion of GMUs 636 and 651 fall within District 17.

A range of species provide hunting opportunities in District 15, including elk, deer, bear, cougar, waterfowl, grouse, and a variety of other small game. The extent, frequency, and type of monitoring varies by species, but for many the most consistently collected information comes from harvest statistics. Hunting opportunities exist from alpine meadows above timberline to marine areas at sea level in Hood Canal and Puget Sound, including public and private lands. The most hunted landscape in District 15 is industrial forestland, commonly characterized by multi-aged forests consisting primarily of Douglas fir and red alder. Recreational access on most industrial forestland is subject to specific rules or requirements depending on who owns the land, and all District 15 GMUs have some level of access limitations.

The following sections provide a summary of current knowledge for several species with the intent to provide hunters with the best information to make an informed decision on where they want to hunt in District 15, as well as what they can expect to encounter regarding potential for success, competition with other hunters, and access.

For more information on the status of Washington's hunted wildlife, hunters should read the [Game Status and Trend Report](#), which is published annually and available for download on the Department's website.

Elk

General information, management objectives, and population status

All elk in District 15 are Roosevelt elk. Only three GMUs (621, 636, and 651) offer reliable elk hunting. There are no known herds in GMUs 627 or 633, but the Department occasionally receives reports of elk sightings in these units. Elk in GMU 624 reside mostly near the city of Sequim, where harvest is conducted through WDFW's Wildlife Conflict Section. Periodically WDFW receives reports of elk (individuals or small groups) elsewhere in this unit, but nothing that suggests reliable elk hunting exists away from the Sequim herd.

As for GMUs 621, 636, and 651, the quality of elk hunting is fair. These units are usually within the targeted range for bull to cow ratios in the post season (12-25 bulls per 100 cows) but are below population size objectives in all three GMUs. Although we are currently below objectives in the number

of elk across these GMUs, individual herds that primarily occupy private agricultural lands are likely at or above thresholds for elk damage/conflict. Treponeme-associated hoof disease (TAHD) is present in GMUs 636 and 651 and may affect calf productivity in these units, as we have recorded lower than expected spring calf to cow ratios in recent years, averaging around 25 calves per 100 cows. In 621, only two elk have tested positive for TAHD.

Which GMU should elk hunters hunt?

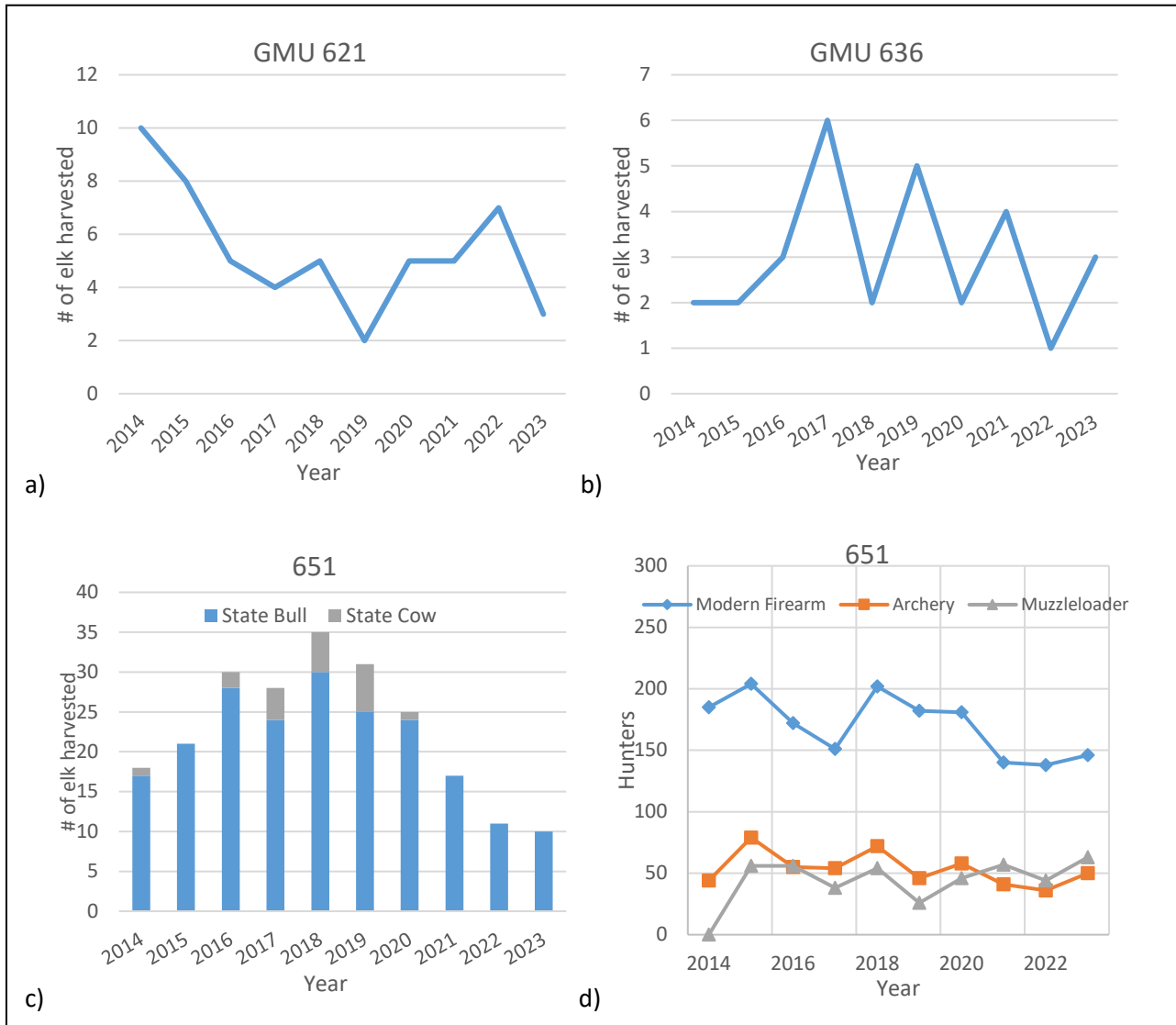
It depends. If you are looking for a special permit bull hunt and do not mind navigating the intricacies of hunting around small private land parcels, you might select GMU 621. If you'd prefer to hunt elk where there are few hunters and decent public land hunting, you might apply for a special bull permit hunt in GMU 636. If you are looking for a general season hunt and have the resources to buy a timberland access permit, GMU 651 is your choice in District 15.

Elk hunting in GMUs 621 and 636 is limited to a special permit draw for bulls only. The number of permits available changes slightly every year, but on average there are 13 permits in GMU 621 and eight permits in GMU 636 distributed among modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader hunters. Although a bit misleading due to the small number of permits, hunter success is pretty good, averaging 62% for archery, 43% for muzzleloaders, and 61% for modern firearm hunters in GMU 621. In GMU 636, muzzleloader hunters report the highest success at 80%, followed by rifle hunters at 70%, and archery hunters at 10% during the last five years. Bull harvest averages seven in GMU 621 and three in GMU 636 (Figure 1).

GMU 651 is open for general season hunting during the early archery, modern firearm, and late-muzzleloader seasons. This is a three-point minimum bull unit for all seasons, except antlerless elk are legal in Elk Area 6061 for archery hunters. The number of hunters and elk harvest are declining in this unit (Figure 2). Five-year average hunter success by weapon type in this GMU is 7% for archery, 6% for muzzleloaders, and 8% for modern firearm hunters.

Tribal hunting occurs in District 15, often accounting for 50% or more of the total elk harvest in the district. Thus, actual hunting pressure in these units may be higher than expected and hunters looking for an elk in any of these GMUs could encounter tribal hunters.

Figure 1. Bull elk harvest in GMUs 621 (a) and 636 (b), and elk harvest (c) and hunter numbers (d) in the Satsop GMU (651), 2014–2023.



What to expect during the 2024 season

The general and permit elk hunting seasons are similar to last year. There are seven modern firearm, four archery, and three muzzleloader permits available in GMU 621. There are six modern firearm, five archery, and one muzzleloader permits available in GMU 636. Each permit season provides additional days to hunt compared to the general season.

Hunters in GMU 621 must navigate a challenging mix of public and private land ownerships. Although elk may be found elsewhere, the most consistently observed groups live along four main river drainages that flow into Hood Canal, including the Dosewallips, Duckabush, Hamma Hamma, and North Fork Skokomish rivers. Elk in the Dosewallips and Duckabush areas are the most reliably found and remain in the lower river valleys and on nearby valley ridges year-round or migrate to summer range in Olympic

National Park (ONP). Recently, some elk from the Duckabush herd have moved south to new areas between the Hamma Hamma and Duckabush rivers. Hunting either of these groups will likely require permission to hunt on private lands.

The other areas with the most reliably found elk groups in GMU 621 occur along the Hamma Hamma River and in the Lilliwaup Swamp east of Lake Cushman and the North Fork Skokomish River. These areas provide decent public land access on Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) managed land; however, recent attempts to observe these elk have not been successful, suggesting hunters may also have a challenging time finding elk here. Although these elk have been non-migratory in recent years, seasonal movements into ONP and the Mount Skokomish Wilderness Area have been documented for these elk in the past and may be occurring now.

Elk in GMU 636 can be found in the upper Wynoochee River valley around Lake Wynoochee, the South Fork Skokomish River valley, and near the community of Matlock. A Green Diamond Resource Co. access permit is recommended for hunting near Matlock.

Consistent with last year, GMU 651 is open to general season hunting for all weapon types, including a 3-point minimum or antlerless season in Elk Area 6061 for archery hunters. Hunters will need a Green Diamond Resource Co. access permit to hunt where most elk reside in this GMU.

Elk areas

There are two elk areas in District 15: Elk Area 6061 (Twin Satsop) and Elk Area 6071 (Dungeness). Elk Area 6061 was established primarily to aid in addressing chronic elk damage issues, while Elk Area 6071 was established to limit elk hunting to support public safety.

Current hunting regulations allow the harvest of 3-point minimum bull or antlerless elk during the general early archery season in Elk Area 6061, while elk harvest in Elk Area 6071 is conducted on a limited basis through the Wildlife Conflict Section by landowner and Master Hunter permits.

Notable hunting changes

None.

Deer

General information, management goals, and population status

Black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) is the only deer species in District 15. The Department's objective for deer in District 15 is to maintain productive populations while providing for multiple uses, including recreational, educational, and aesthetic (WDFW Game Management Plan, 2008). Buck harvest is any antlered buck, while antlerless harvest is limited to certain weapon types and/or by permit.

Currently, WDFW does not use formal estimates or indices of population size to monitor deer populations in District 15. Instead, harvest trends (harvest, hunters, success, and harvest per unit effort) are used as an index to trends. WDFW recognizes the limitations of this approach and is currently evaluating new techniques for monitoring black-tailed deer populations independent of harvest data.

Which GMU should deer hunters hunt?

There are ample general season opportunities for deer hunters in District 15. All GMUs in this district have general and permit season hunting opportunities, starting in September with the early archery season and the Olympic Wilderness high buck hunt, which is open to modern firearm and muzzleloader hunters.

Field observations and recent harvest trends suggest good deer hunting potential exists in GMUs 621, 627, and 633. GMU 651 remains a popular hunting unit, but portions owned by Green Diamond Resource Co. require an access permit. Hunters may find good deer hunting in lower-elevation habitats in GMU 636, but deer density in this unit appears to decline at higher elevations. Hunters need a Green Diamond Resource Co. access permit to hunt some areas in GMU 636 around Matlock; elsewhere no access permit is required, and much of the unit is U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land.

What to expect during the 2024 season

It is uncommon for deer populations to fluctuate dramatically from year to year, especially in District 15, where severe winter weather resulting in large die-offs rarely occurs. Hunter numbers also typically don't change dramatically from one year to the next. Consequently, the best predictors of future harvest during general seasons are recent harvest trends, hunter numbers, and hunter success. Figures 2 through 4 provide trend data for each of these statistics by GMU and are intended to provide hunters with the best information to make an informed decision on where to hunt in District 15, as well as what they can expect to encounter regarding hunter success and hunter numbers.

Deer areas

Deer Area 6020 is in GMU 624 and was established primarily to aid in addressing chronic damage issues. This GMU is open to general season, any deer harvest for all three weapon types. Additionally, 40 second deer permits are available for archery hunters in this area.

Notable hunting changes

Very few changes are anticipated for deer hunting in District 15, although the Department adjusted permit levels for some hunts.



A black-tailed buck in an alpine meadow. Photo by Bryan Murphie.

Figure 2. Trends in the total number of buck (blue) and antlerless (gray) deer harvested during general modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader deer seasons combined, 2014–2023. Total deer harvest (black line) includes harvest from state general and permit seasons plus tribal harvest. Tribal harvest from 2023 not included.

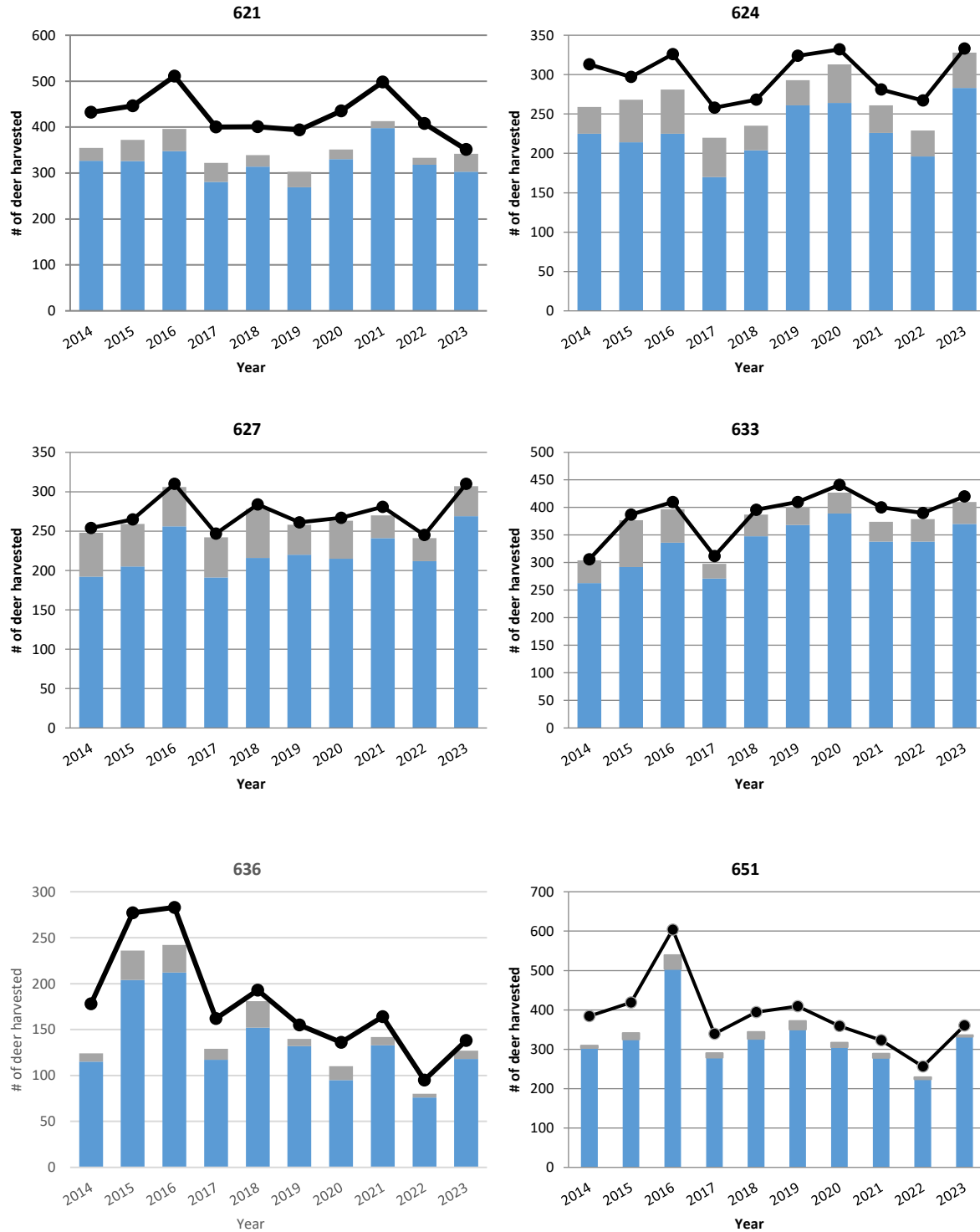


Figure 3. Trends in hunter numbers during general modern firearm (blue diamond), archery (orange square), and muzzleloader (gray triangle) deer seasons in District 15, 2014–2023.

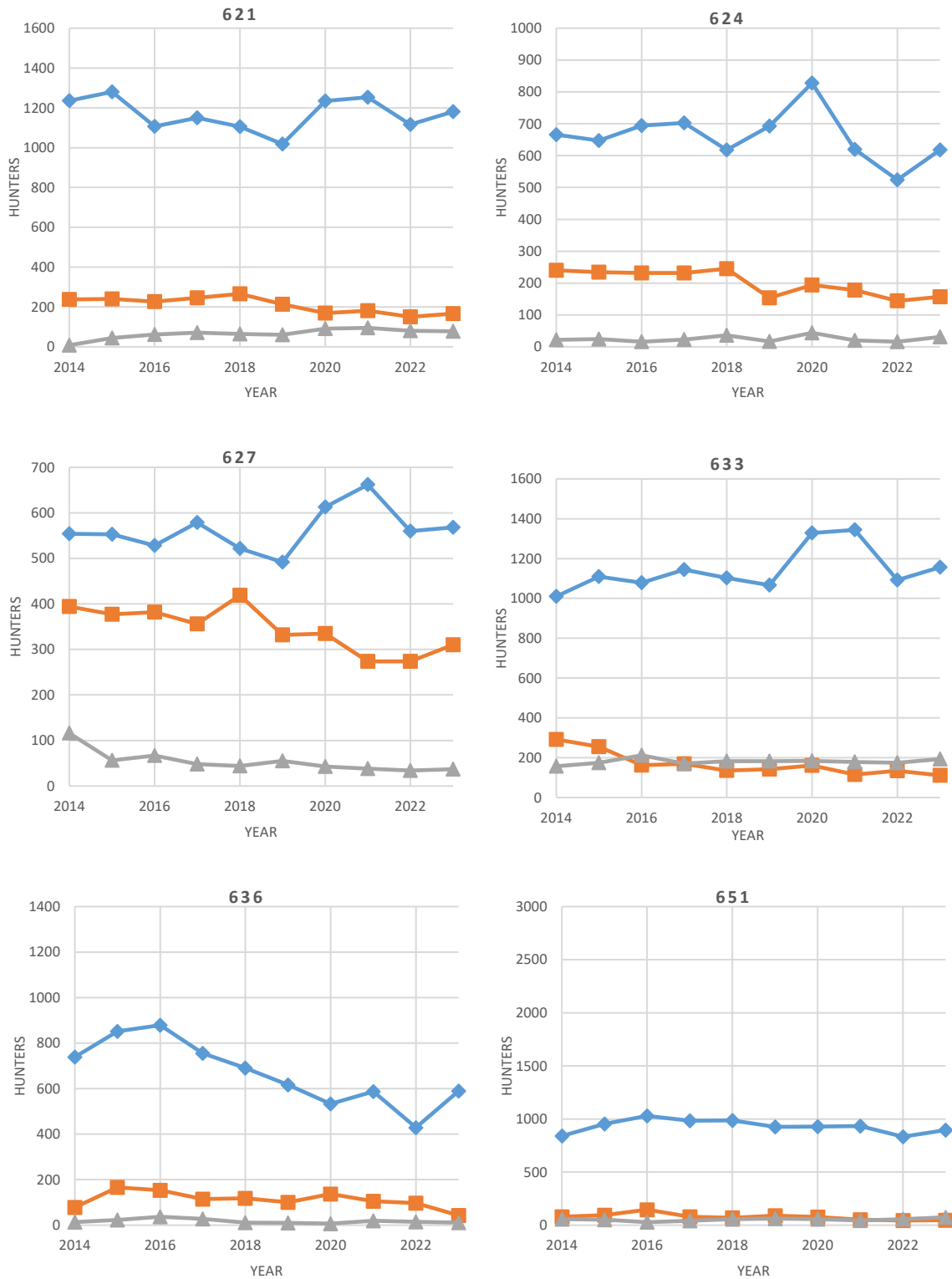


Figure 4. Trends in hunter success rates during general modern firearm (blue diamond), archery (orange square), and muzzleloader (gray triangle) deer seasons in District 15, 2014–2023.



Black bear

General information, management goals, and population status

Black bears occur throughout District 15, but population densities likely vary among GMUs and change over time. In 2019, WDFW began measuring bear density across the state, sampling in a few areas each year. By 2023, survey efforts had been conducted in more than 22 GMUs and densities have ranged from seven to 35 bears per 100 square kilometers, or about 38 square miles (WDFW, 2023). In District 15, the portion of GMU 636 under USFS ownership along the foothills of the Olympic Mountains was sampled in 2023. The estimate derived for this area was 12 bears per 100 square kilometers. Other nearby locations that have been sampled include the Clearwater (615), which had an estimate of 31 bears per 100 square kilometers in 2022 (WDFW, 2023) and Capitol Forest (663), which had an estimate of 12-14 bears per 100 square kilometers (Beausoleil et al., 2012).

District 15 contains part of the Coastal Black Bear Management Unit (BBMU) (GMUs 621, 636, and 651) and part of the Puget Sound BBMU (GMUs 624, 627, and 633). The current black bear hunting season guidelines for these BBMUs are designed to maintain black bear populations at their current level. The fall black bear hunting season for all District 15 units is Aug. 1 to Nov. 15. Hunters can buy up to two bear tags during each license year. These rules have been consistent since 1997. Periodically, spring bear permit hunts have been available, but there have been no spring bear hunts since 2022.

What to expect during the 2024 season

Most bear harvest in District 15 comes from hunters harvesting a bear opportunistically while hunting other species like deer and elk, although many hunters do specifically hunt bears. Hunter success in District 15 has averaged 8% in the Coastal BBMU and Puget Sound BBMU over the last five years. Hunter success is likely higher for those who specifically hunt bears versus those who buy a bear tag just in case they see one while they are deer or elk hunting.

Bear harvest in District 15 decreased in 2023 (Figure 5) but is usually highest in GMU 621 (Figure 6). GMUs 621 and 636 offer the most accessible public land in the district, and hunting the higher-elevation huckleberry patches could be a good strategy.

Notable hunting changes

None.

Figure 5. Trends in the number of male (blue bar) and female (orange bar) black bears and total number of bears harvested (gray line) during the general bear season in District 15, 2019–2023. Bears removed for other reasons are not included.

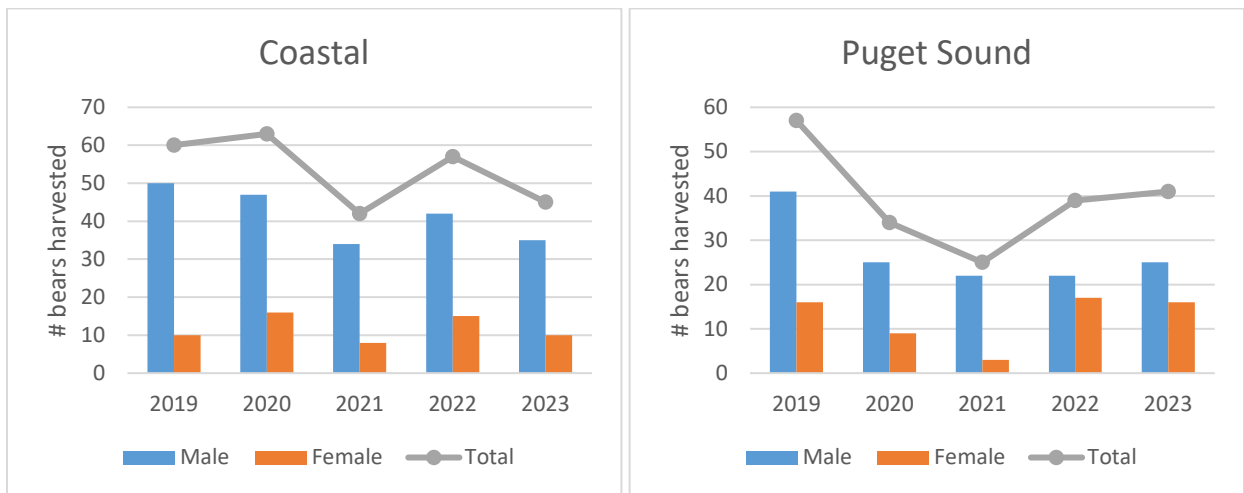
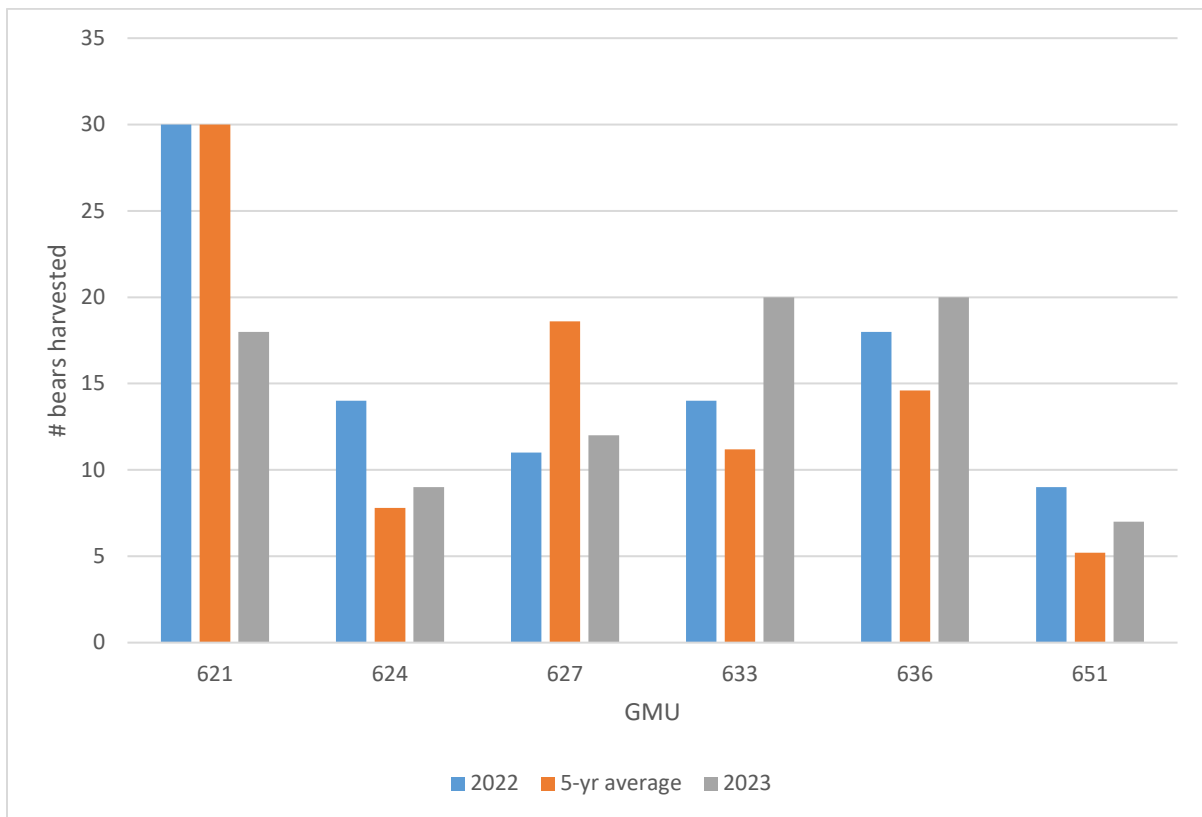


Figure 6. The number of bears harvested in each GMU during the 2022 and 2023 seasons in District 15. The five-year average for total number of bears harvested in each GMU is also included.



Cougar

General information, management goals, and population status

Cougars occur throughout District 15. WDFW established harvest guidelines with the primary objective of maintaining a stable cougar population (Table 2). Cougar season rules changed for the 2024 hunting season and are summarized in the Notable Hunting Changes section. Anyone planning to hunt cougar should confirm the season is open by calling 1-866-364-4868. Harvest guidelines, 2023 general season hunter harvest, five-year average hunter harvest, and five-year average total removals by population management unit (PMU) for 2023 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Harvest guidelines and the reported 2023 hunter harvest for the three cougar hunt areas located in District 15.

PMU/GMU	Harvest guideline	2023 hunter harvest	5-year average hunter harvest	5-year average total removals
PMU 44 - 618, 636, 638	3-5	1	1	1
PMU 45 - 621, 624, 627, 633	None	8	5	10
PMU 46 - 642, 648, 651	6-8	8	7	12

What to expect during the 2024 season

In 2024, the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted several changes to cougar management guidelines that may affect hunting in several areas. These changes are described in the Notable Hunting Changes section below. It is most important for hunters to know that the cougar season may close at any time in any hunt area, depending on the amount of cougar removals that occur. So, hunters need to check the hotline regularly before and during the hunting season to make sure the season is still open.

Notable hunting changes

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted several rule changes for the 2024 cougar hunting season. This season setting structure or rule may change for future seasons as discussions about cougar hunting in Washington continue. To summarize the changes for the 2024 cougar season:

- Season dates: Sept. 1, 2024 – March 31, 2025
- All PMUs or hunt areas currently with a harvest guideline will now have a harvest cap.
- The cap is based on an estimated cougar density of 2.3 cougars per 100 square kilometers and a 13% intrinsic growth rate.

- All known human-caused mortalities of cougars 18 months and older will count toward a 13% or 20% cap.
 - PMU 44/GMUs 618, 636, 638 has a 13% cap at five and a 20% cap at seven.
 - PMU 45/GMUs 621, 624, 627, 633 does not have a cap.
 - PMU 46/GMUs 642, 648, 651 has a 13% cap at seven and a 20% cap at 11.
- The count of cougars removed starts April 1 and includes removals associated with depredation, conflict, public safety, hunter harvest, and the like.
- If total removals reach the 13% cap, the hunt area will close to hunting.
- If total removals reach the 13% cap before the hunting season, the cap increases to 20% and the hunting season will open, but could close at any time if removals reach the 20% cap.
- None of the rule changes prohibit the removal of cougars associated with depredation or public safety concerns.
- Finally, the Department may close hunting in any hunt area prior to the cap being reached, upon consideration of factors such as disease, suspected additional mortality, or any other issue affecting the cougar population.
- Call the cougar hunting season hotline, 1-866-364-4868, before you hunt.

Mountain goat

General information, management goals, and population status

Mountain goats were introduced into the Olympic Mountain range before the establishment of ONP in the 1920s. Mountain goats thrived in the Olympic range, rapidly expanding their distribution and abundance to over 1,000 goats by 1983. Concerns over the negative effect of an abundant introduced goat population on high-elevation endemic plants and soil erosion, prompted ONP to relocate 407 goats to other ranges outside the Olympics in the early 1980s. A mountain goat hunt outside ONP ran from 1983 until 1997, and 119 goats were harvested. WDFW closed the Olympic goat hunt in 1997. The population rebounded from these management actions and expanded its range and abundance to wilderness areas outside ONP by 2014. To again address concerns over the negative effect of an abundant introduced goat population on high-elevation endemic plants and soil erosion, ONP, USFS, and WDFW initiated efforts to remove mountain goats from the Olympics.

WDFW established a new permit hunt in 2014. This ran until 2018, and 15 goats were harvested. WDFW suspended the permit hunt during a joint management action with ONP and USFS to remove mountain goats from the Olympics beginning in 2018. This project included aerial captures and relocation, aerial lethal removals, and ground-based lethal removals, and concluded in 2022. A total of 548 goats were removed (Happe et al., 2023). WDFW held another permit hunt in 2021 with 25 permits available, but only one adult male goat was harvested. Tribal hunters harvested nine goats during this timeframe.

Removals were conducted across the Olympics, in and out of the park, with many coming out of the WDFW permit hunt area on USFS lands. It is currently thought that most remaining goats are in remote

areas of ONP and few, if any, are left outside the park accessible for hunting. Only three unconfirmed reports of mountain goats in the park, and none from outside the park, have been recorded since the removal effort concluded. WDFW will continue to assess where goats are outside the park to determine if a new permit hunt opportunity exists.

Notable hunting changes

No hunt in 2024. Future hunts may be recommended should mountain goats be found in huntable locations.

Ducks

Common species

Several duck species use District 15. Common dabbling ducks include northern pintail, American wigeon, gadwall, mallard, green-wing teal, and northern shoveler. Species of divers, including bufflehead, scaup, ring-necked ducks, and common goldeneye, are also present on fresh and salt water. Nesting wood ducks can be located throughout the district early in the season and can provide a unique hunting opportunity. Sea ducks, including scoters, Barrow's goldeneye, long-tailed ducks, canvasbacks, and harlequin ducks inhabit Hood Canal and other saltwater areas.

Population status and 2024 prospects

Pacific Flyway waterfowl populations have remained strong for several years, allowing liberal seasons for many species. Wintering duck populations in Washington usually represent 10% or more of the total flyway population.

District 15 hunters can expect similar opportunities during the 2024 season. As in recent years, hunter success often depends on rainfall and storm events during the waterfowl season. A lack of flooded farm fields can sharply reduce hunting opportunities in District 15. Alternatively, the marine waters of Hood Canal can offer some good waterfowl hunting. Five-year average duck harvest is 5,451.

Public land opportunities

Public hunting access exists at the mouths of the Duckabush, Quilcene, and Union rivers. Many of the undeveloped lakes and marshes on the Tahuya Peninsula's DNR-managed land offer walk-in hunting opportunities for mallards, ringnecks, and scaup.

Notable hunting changes

What's NEW in 2024-2025? Harlequin duck permits! Thirty-eight permits were made available to eligible applicants through an August drawing; the application period was July 1 to Aug. 14. To apply for a Harlequin duck permit, each applicant must have a valid Washington small game hunting license,

migratory bird permit, AND migratory bird authorization. For more information, visit the WDFW [Harlequin duck hunting permit page](#).

Geese

Common species

The Canada geese subspecies most likely found in District 15 include western, lesser, Taverner's, and cackler. White-fronted and, occasionally, snow geese can also be encountered.

Population status and 2024 prospects

Like ducks, goose numbers in the district are largely driven by weather. The more severe the weather, the more likely the northern subspecies can be seen in the area. Anecdotal observations suggest that local westerns are stable or slightly increasing.

Goose hunting opportunities in District 15 are expected to be similar to trends observed during the last few seasons. Most geese are taken on private farm fields, and securing permission is essential. When funding exists, WDFW attempts to lease fields that regularly attract waterfowl. Five-year average Canada goose harvest is 428.

Public land opportunities

Same as those listed under ducks.

Forest grouse

General information and population status

Although grouse occur throughout the district, Mason County offers the most hunting opportunity. The Olympic National Forest and Skokomish GMU are two of the more popular grouse hunting areas. Blue (sooty) grouse tend to occur in the coniferous forests at higher elevations above 1,000 feet, although they may be found at lower elevations in District 15. Ruffed grouse can occur throughout the district in coniferous and mixed forests. In the fall, either species can be found feeding on berries like salal, Oregon grape, and huckleberry. More ruffed than sooty are harvested in District 15.

Grouse hunting season was Sept. 1 to Dec. 31 for decades until 2021. Dates shifted to Sept. 15 to Jan. 15 in 2021 to reduce harvest of adult females caring for young and ultimately increase grouse abundance. The daily bag limit for grouse increased from three to four in 2009 and changed to a mixed bag limit in 2015 (four birds, but not all of the same species). Most grouse are harvested by hunters driving roads looking for grouse. As such, grouse harvest is influenced by the amount or extent of roads open to motorized vehicles, which have declined in most District 15 GMUs. This decline is associated with more

regulated access to private industrial forestlands, reduced motorized access to some DNR lands, and the decommissioning of roads on USFS lands on the Olympic Peninsula.

WDFW initiated a formal survey effort to monitor blue (sooty) grouse populations statewide in 2023; results are pending analysis and future work. A similar effort for ruffed grouse has not been implemented. In the meantime, harvest trends like catch per unit effort, expressed as the number of grouse harvested per hunter day, can be an indicator of population trend. A caveat: We expect some decreases in harvest resulting from access changes and perhaps initially around the 2021 season dates shift.

Harvest trends

Grouse harvest statistics are compiled at the county level, rather than the GMUs used for big game species. Mason and Kitsap counties are wholly in District 15, while Jefferson County is split between Districts 15 and 16. In general, the trends we have seen over the last 10 years are somewhat expected given recent regulation and access changes. The number of hunters has been relatively stable (Figure 7), while the number of grouse harvested has increased (Figure 8), but hunters are taking a bit more time to get those grouse (Figure 9). The drop in hunters and harvest after the season date change in 2021 was followed by an increase in 2023.

Figure 7. The number of grouse hunters in Mason (blue line), Jefferson (orange line), and Kitsap (gray line) counties, 2014 – 2023.

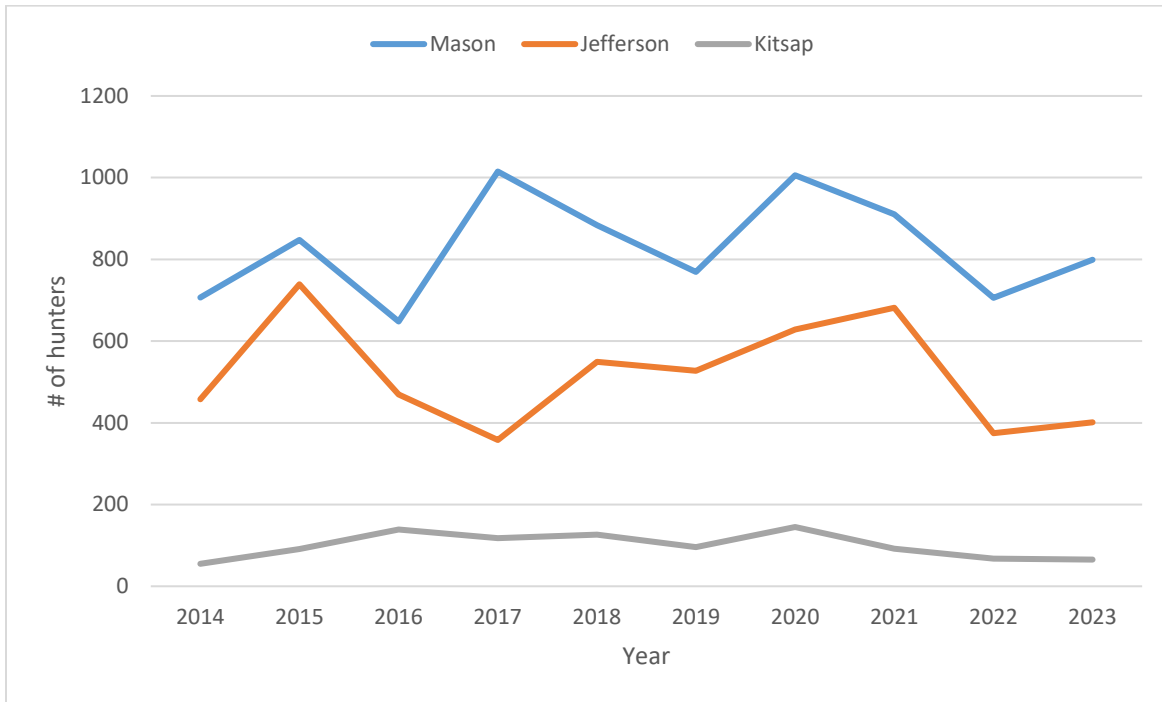


Figure 8. The number of grouse harvested in Mason (blue line), Jefferson (orange line), and Kitsap (gray line) counties, 2014 – 2023.

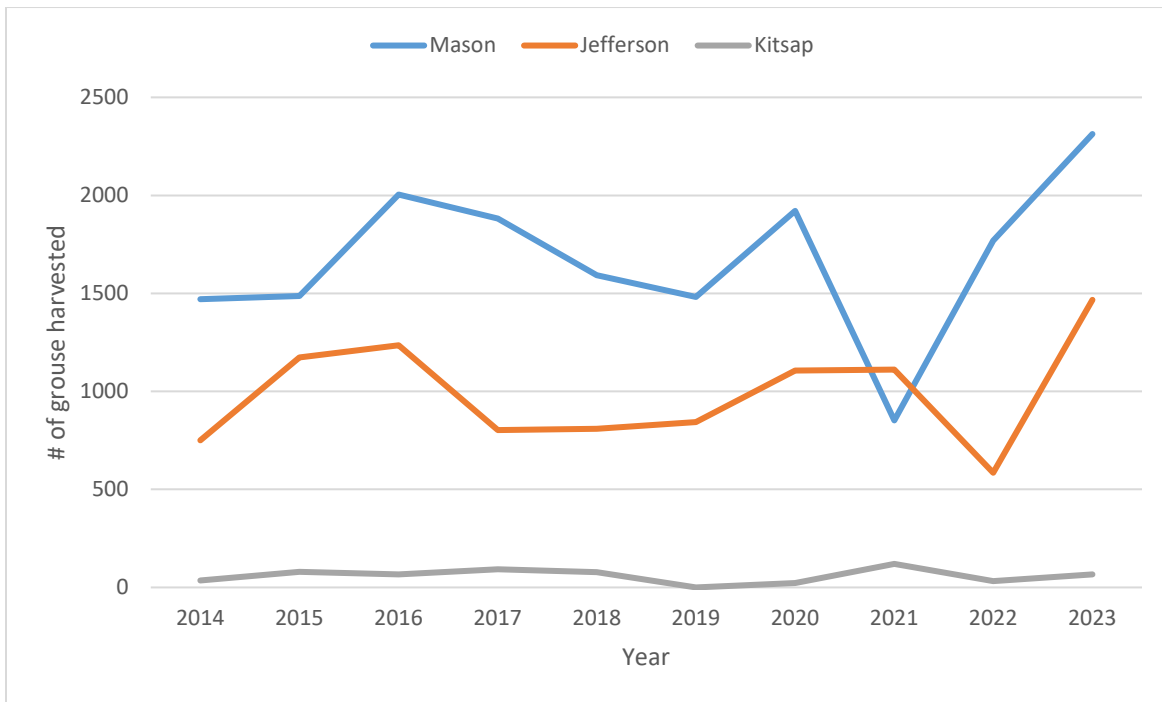
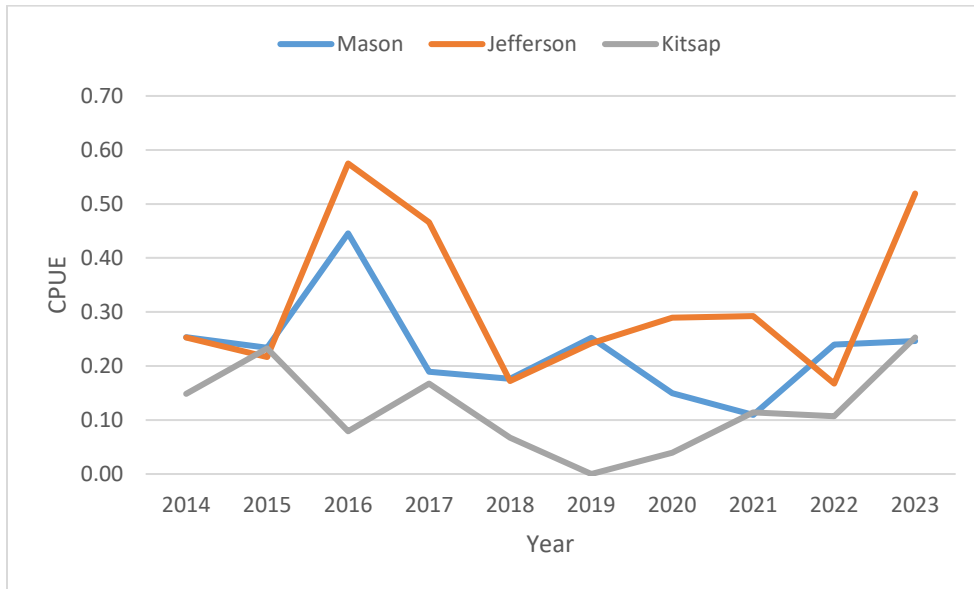


Figure 9. The number of grouse harvested per hunter day in Mason (blue line), Jefferson (orange line), and Kitsap (gray line) counties, 2014 – 2023.



Notable hunting changes

None.

Band-tailed pigeons

General description

Band-tailed pigeons are the largest pigeon species in North America. They inhabit mountainous forests in the western United States, with large coastal populations occurring from British Columbia to northern California. During the breeding season (April to September), band-tailed pigeons are found below 1,000 feet in elevation. In autumn, they eat mainly berries, nuts, grains, acorns, and fruits.

Population status and harvest

WDFW monitors band-tailed pigeon populations using a standardized population index survey, as part of a Pacific Flyway-wide survey effort coordinated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These surveys occur at mineral sites where band-tailed pigeons congregate. Since initiating a standardized mineral site survey, the population index indicates band-tailed pigeon populations have fluctuated through the years but have never declined to levels that would warrant more limited harvest opportunities.

Although band-tailed pigeon harvest statewide is down from 2009 harvest levels, the trend has increased since 2015. The average annual harvest of band-tailed pigeon is highest in Mason County at around 30 birds, followed by Jefferson County (includes east and west Jefferson County) at fewer than 10 birds per year, and Kitsap County where little to no harvest is reported.

Where and how to hunt band-tailed pigeons

Often, band-tailed pigeons congregate in areas where cascara and elderberry are fruiting, which are typically most abundant in 5- to 10-year-old timber harvests. Hunting can be exceptionally good in these areas. Band-tailed pigeons often congregate at seeps and mineral sites, which they show strong site fidelity to and often return year after year. However, many of these sites are difficult to find because they are not abundant and occur in obscure areas. The key to harvesting band-tailed pigeons is scouting. Hunters must locate feeding, roosting, and watering sites, sneak in, or sit patiently and wait for shooting opportunities. If hunters are lucky enough to locate a mineral site where band-tailed pigeons are congregating, they will likely have success in these locations for years to come.

Notable hunting changes

None.

Pheasants

There are no viable populations of wild pheasants in District 15. All pheasant hunting opportunities in District 15 are associated with the Western Washington Pheasant Release Program, which provides an upland bird hunting opportunity and encourages participation from youth and senior hunters. Each year, the program releases 30,000 to 40,000 pheasants at 25 sites, including Hunter Farms, Belfair, Trask Lake, and Mason Lake (Sgt. Mak) in District 15. Release site locations and other details can be found on the WDFW [website](#). In 2023, hunters harvested 2,022 pheasants in District 15, a few more than 2022.

Quail

Although frustratingly unpredictable, hunters are mostly likely to find quail in District 15 in 2- to 6-year-old timber harvests, under power lines, and in tall scotch broom stands throughout Mason and Kitsap counties. Their tendency to run rather than fly or hold for a pointing dog makes them an especially challenging upland game bird. Some locations include the DNR parcels on the Tahuya Peninsula northwest of Belfair and the industrial timberlands between Shelton, Matlock, and McCleary. Walk-in opportunities are also numerous on timber harvests around Mason Lake. The time to scout is in the spring and early summer when the males are quite vocal. In 2023, hunters harvested 47 quail in District 15.

Turkey

Although turkeys are occasionally seen, District 15 has no established turkey populations. Introduction programs were discontinued because populations did not appear to expand, and habitat suitability

models indicated District 15 was unlikely to support viable turkey populations. Occasionally, single birds are spotted, but WDFW doesn't recommend this district for turkey hunting.

Other small game species

Other small game species and furbearers that inhabit District 15 but were not covered in detail include Eastern cottontail rabbits, snowshoe hares, coyotes, beaver, bobcat, raccoons, river otter, marten, mink, muskrat, and weasels. Additional migratory birds include snipe and coot. Crows are also abundant in District 15. Harvest information for these species is available in the WDFW game harvest reports on the Department website.

General overview of hunter access in each GMU

Although District 15 is not well known for large amounts of public land opportunities, they do exist on lands administered by DNR and USFS in all District 15 GMUs. Most hunting opportunities, especially for big game and upland birds, occur on private industrial forestlands owned by timber companies, which allow hunting under a range of restrictions. All hunters are encouraged to check ahead of time to determine if any landowner restrictions apply to the area they plan to hunt.

The information provided below is a brief description of major landowners and the level of motorized access a hunter can expect. Access rules change through the seasons and vary by year. Hunters are encouraged to contact the specific landowner if they have questions related to recreational access. Although other companies own land in District 15, the two primary private timber companies with land are Green Diamond Resource and Rayonier. Both require access permits to recreate on some of their lands in Kitsap, Mason, and Jefferson counties. Hunters should visit the appropriate landowner website for more information.

GMU 621 (Olympic)

Access in GMU 621 is good for deer hunters and challenging for elk hunters, as most elk are found on lower-elevation private lands along the major river valleys. This GMU is a mixture of private timberlands, private lands, DNR, and USFS. Access to USFS land is generally allowed year-round. DNR land is accessible to motorized vehicles or walk-in only in some areas. Most private timberlands are non-motorized access. All private agricultural lands require owner permission to hunt.

GMU 624 (Coyle)

Other than the resident elk herd in the Sequim area, the Coyle Unit is usually considered a deer area. Although there are scattered timberlands publicly owned by DNR, most are privately owned. The largest property manager is Rayonier. Although some DNR and private mainlines may be open to motor

vehicles, most hunting access is walk-in or by non-motorized vehicle. Rayonier requires an access permit to hunt on most of their land in this GMU.

GMU 627 (Kitsap)

The Kitsap Unit is a highly developed area, with private property throughout. However, there is still hunting opportunity on forestlands owned by DNR and Rayonier. Whether state or private, most access in this unit is walk-in or by non-motorized means, except that DNR allows all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use on designated trails on some of its land. Rayonier requires an access permit to hunt their land in most locations.

GMU 633 (Mason)

The Mason Unit is best known as a deer area. DNR has land throughout, with extensive holdings on the Tahuya Peninsula. In the Mason Unit, most deer hunting occurs on private property controlled by Green Diamond Resource Co. and Manke Lumber Co. Whether state or private, most access in this unit is walk-in or by non-motorized vehicles, except that DNR allows ATV use on designated trails on some of its land.

GMU 636 (Skokomish)

This GMU is a mixture of private timberlands, private lands, and USFS. Green Diamond Resource Co. is the largest private timberland owner in this unit, and they do open some areas to motorized use from September through December. Some areas are non-motorized access only and some require an access permit, particularly for their land near Matlock. Fire danger risk and active logging operations may delay gate openings.

Upper elevations and portions of this GMU in the upper Wynoochee River and Skokomish River valleys are primarily USFS, with most areas open year-round for vehicle access. USFS prohibits motorized access during the winter in some areas to minimize disturbance to wildlife.

GMU 651 (Satsop)

Green Diamond Resource Co. is the largest private timberland owner in this unit, and they require hunters to purchase an access permit for a large section of this GMU. Some of their land may be open to motorized access without a permit from September through December, while other portions may allow walk-in hunting without an access permit.

Private Lands Access Program

WDFW also negotiates hunting access opportunities with smaller private landowners, usually on farmland for waterfowl or pheasant hunting. Hunters are encouraged to call the WDFW Region 6 office

in Montesano (360-249-4628) or periodically check for updated information on company websites for the most current information about private lands access in District 15.

Public land resources

Washington Department of Natural Resources – Olympic Region

olympic.region@dnr.wa.gov

360-374-2800

411 Tillicum Lane, Forks, WA 98331-9271

[Website](#)

Washington Department of Natural Resources – South Puget Sound Region

southpuget.region@dnr.wa.gov

360-825-1631

950 Farman Ave. N., Enumclaw, WA 98022-9282

[Website](#)

U.S. Forest Service – Hood Canal Ranger District – Quilcene

360-765-2200

295142 Highway 101 S., P.O. Box 280, Quilcene, WA 98376

Online tools and maps

Most District 15 GMUs are a checkerboard of ownerships, and sometimes it can be challenging to determine who owns the land where a hunter wishes to hunt. Some online tools and resources can provide valuable information to help solve the landowner puzzle. The following is a list of a few resources available to the public. Parcel ownership can also be accessed from each county assessor's webpage by using their online mapping tools. Alternatively, private companies found online offer other map products.

WDFW's hunting regulations web map

WDFW's hunting regulations [web map](#) provides hunters with a great interactive tool for identifying hunting seasons and locating tracts of public land within each GMU.

DNR public lands quadrangle (PLQ) maps

The best sources for identifying the specific location of public lands are DNR PLQ maps, which can be purchased for less than \$10 on [DNR's website](#).