

Hunter harvest stats show drop in elk and mule deer harvest, bump in whitetails in 2023, Monday, March 25, 2024

Idaho Fish and Game Press Releases and Articles

Total elk harvest in 2023: 18,568. Antlered: 11,363. Antlerless: 7,205

Total mule deer harvest in 2023: 18,329. Antlered: 15,245. Antlerless: 3,083

Total white-tailed deer harvest in 2023: 19,828. Antlered: 13,741. Antlerless: 6,088

Total deer harvest in 2023: 38,157

For the first time since 2013, statewide elk harvest came in below 20,000.

It didn't take a whole lot of rubbing the crystal ball to forecast a less-than-stellar mule deer harvest in 2023 because of the severe winter that preceded it. And with last fall's harvest stats now available, the story that commenced after one of the worst eastern Idaho winters on record can be told.

Ironically, it may have been the opposite weather that contributed to the lowest elk harvest since 2013. Warm fall weather with little precipitation often creates poor hunting conditions, but weather or not, the statewide elk harvest dropped nearly 2,400 animals compared to the prior year.



But not all deer and elk harvests were down. White-tailed deer harvest had a modest bump—and the first increase in four years—signaling herds may be recovering from a large disease die-off in 2021.

“It was kind of a screwy year,” said Toby Boudreau, Deer and Elk Coordinator. “I think everyone expected the mule deer harvest to drop significantly, but we’re hopeful the mild winter will speed up their recovery, or at minimum, get it off to a good start.”

The elk harvest is a bit of a head-scratcher. Anecdotally, Fish and Game heard reports from experienced elk hunters who were not finding elk in their usual spots during fall, and suspect weather may have been a significant factor.

“We’re fairly confident the dip in the statewide harvest does not reflect a dip in the elk population, but it may take another year to see that,” said Boudreau.

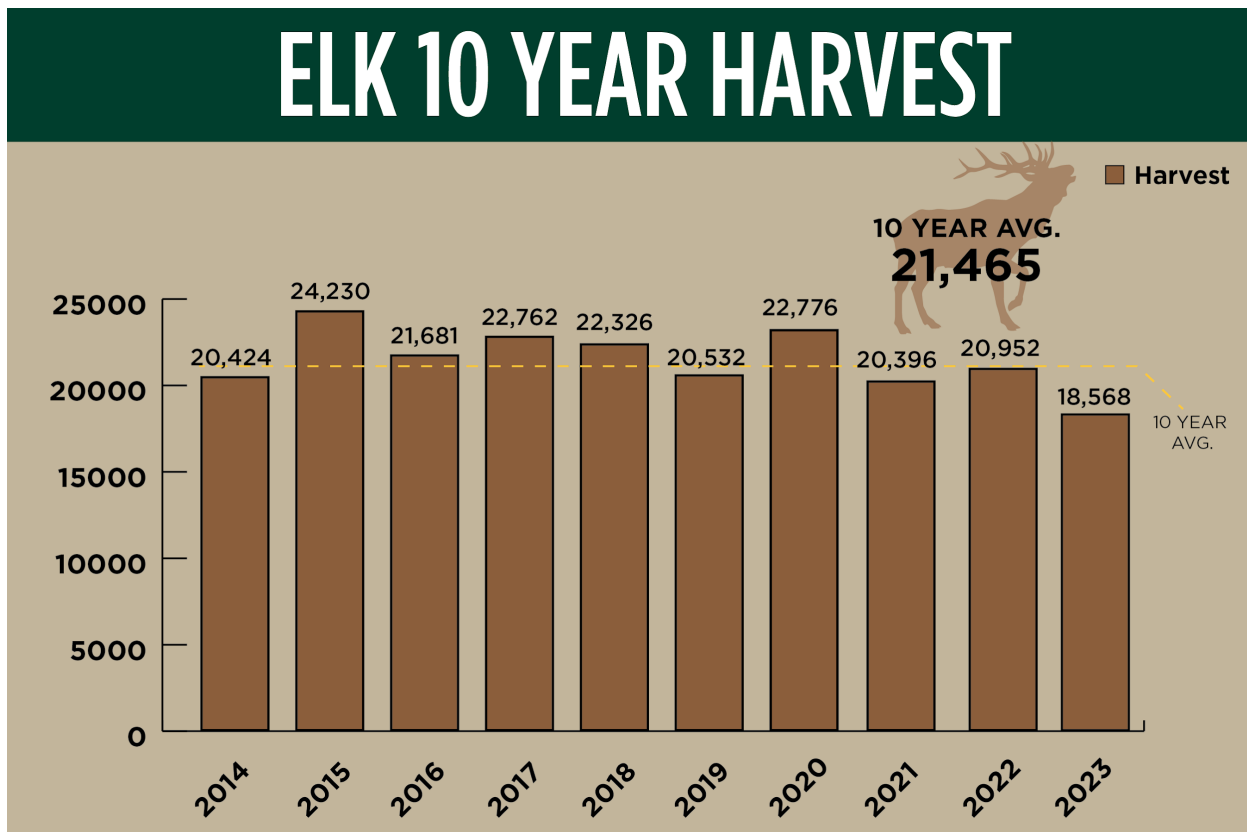
Additionally, Fish and Game used data from radio-collared elk that showed some herds stayed on summer range much longer than in other years. In fact, the lack of movement off their summer ranges actually prevented the Department from conducting one of its planned elk surveys.

Harvest highs and lows

It was a good run. 2023 would have been the tenth year in a row for elk harvest to eclipse the 20,000 mark, but that was not how last fall played out. Elk hunters took home 18,568 elk in 2023, roughly an 11% drop in animals harvested compared to 2022. Roughly 87,864 elk hunters—less than 1% fewer than 2022—took to the mountains in 2023 in search of elk, with 21% of those individuals successfully harvesting an elk.

To no one's surprise, mule deer hunting saw a big decline in 2023. A total of 74,503 mule deer hunters hunted last fall, with nearly 25% of those successfully packing out a mule deer. Last year's roughly 22% decrease in total mule deer harvest is also the seventh-consecutive year below the 10-year average. While it may seem impossible to have 70% of the years below the 10-year average, it's a reflection of an unusually large mule deer harvest in 2015-16 that drove up the 10-year average.

Finally, onto whitetails. White-tailed deer harvest has been at the top of bad news headlines in recent years due to large disease outbreaks; however, in 2023, the number of whitetails harvested showed a bump in the right direction, from 19,182 in 2022 to 19,828 in 2023, which hopefully reflects recovering whitetail herds. Last fall's whitetail harvest also eclipsed the mule deer harvest for only the sixth time since 1975, when Fish and Game began tracking deer harvest by species.



Elk

By the numbers

- Total elk harvest in 2023: 18,568
- 2022 harvest total: 20,952
- Overall hunter success rate: 21%
- Antlered: 11,363
- Antlerless: 7,205
- Taken during general hunts: 11,719 (17% success rate)
- Taken during controlled hunts: 6,849 (23% success rate)

How it stacks up

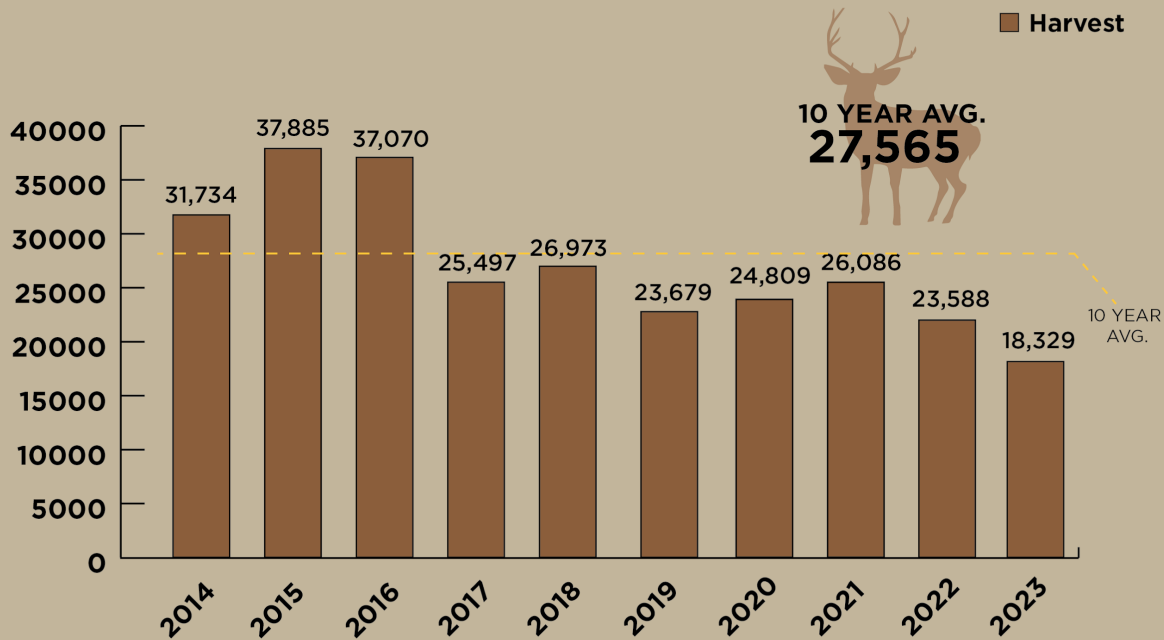
The most notable statistic from the 2023 elk season is the first bullet point shown above: 18,568 total elk harvested. That number is down 11% from the previous year and marks the first time since 2013 that the total number of elk harvested came in below 20,000.

Now, what does that mean? It's difficult to prove what factor or factors played a part in the drop in elk harvest, but it's within the normal fluctuations in harvests from year to year.

Statewide, elk populations have been relatively stable, and were not impacted by winter as badly as mule deer or pronghorn in eastern Idaho.

And overall hunter numbers were practically identical to the previous year's hunter effort. Additionally, general season hunter success was right in line with previous years (17%) while controlled hunt success dropped substantially from an average of 41% over the previous five years to 23% last year.

MULE DEER 10 YEAR HARVEST



Mule Deer

By the numbers

- Total mule deer harvest in 2023: 18,329
- 2022 harvest total: 23,588
- Overall hunter success rate: 25%
- Antlered: 15,245
- Antlerless: 3,083
- Taken during general hunts: 13,267 (21% success rate)
- Taken during controlled hunts: 5,062 (46% success rate)

How it stacks up

Leading up to the 2023 mule deer hunting season, Fish and Game wildlife managers knew hunting would be tough due in large part to one of the worst winters we've had on record in eastern Idaho.

If you recall, in March 2023, Fish and Game wildlife managers saw the writing on the wall, and [proactively cut many antlerless hunts for that year](#). Despite a large effort by staff and volunteers to emergency feed deer and elk, a lot of animals were lost due to deep, prolonged snow and frigid temperatures that stretched into spring.

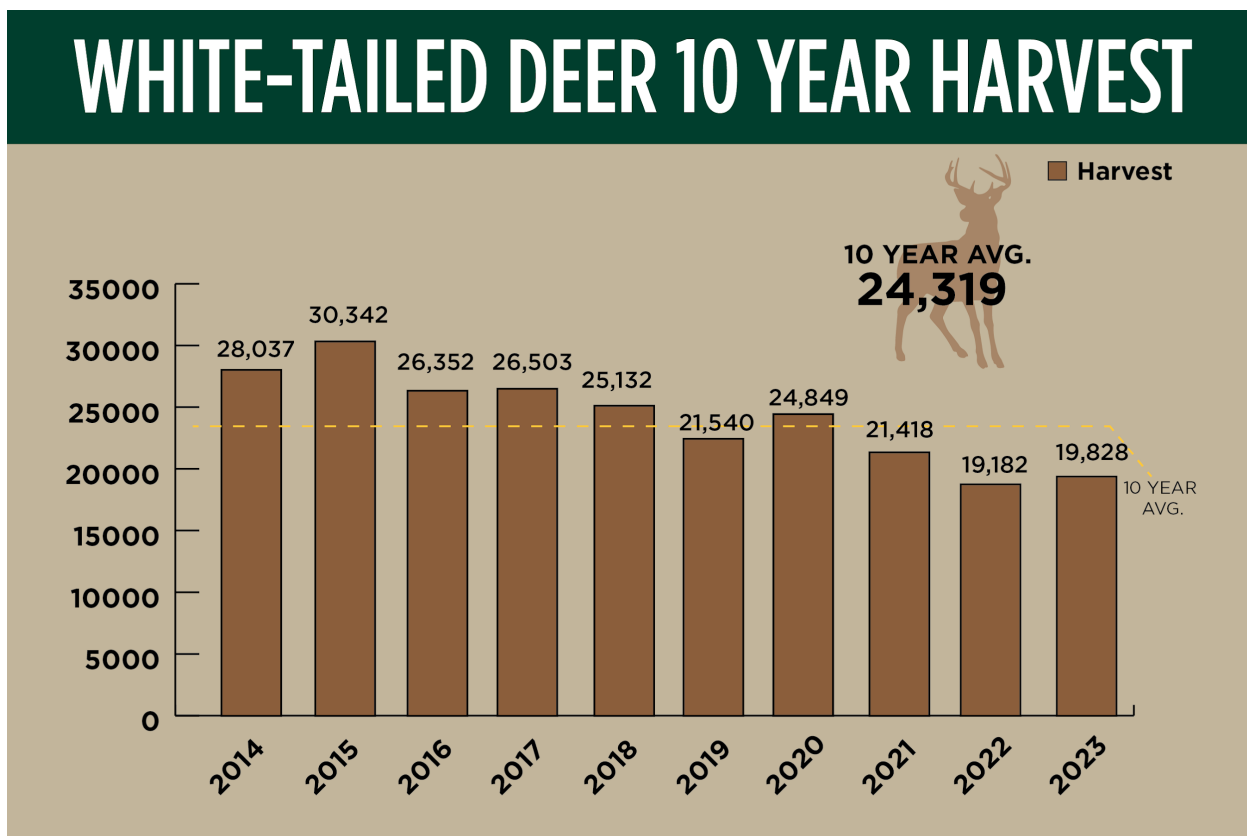
Harsh winters like the one in 2023 can potentially set herds back several years, and the department will continue to monitor the effects in the upcoming years.

Looking at last year's mule deer harvest numbers from a statewide perspective, we see a roughly 22% decline from the previous year, marking the first time mule deer harvest has, too, been below the 20,000 mark in over 12 years.

Hunters themselves appeared less on the landscape last year, too, tallying 74,503 during 2023. That's a 6% drop.

Back in August 2023, Idaho Fish and Game wildlife officials noted that hunters should expect to see fewer fawns and two-point bucks in those hard-hit areas, and smaller herds in general. And while mule deer herds typically take several years to rebound from a harsh winter, they are a resilient bunch. And incredibly mild winters, like the one we just had, can significantly benefit rebounding muleys.

The bottomline: Mule deer herds got hit hard in parts of southern Idaho, but history has shown they can recover, and a few more mild winters can accelerate that effort. Hunters need to have some patience, but they may start to see signs of recovery as early as next fall with more young bucks being out there.



White-Tailed Deer

By the numbers

- Total white-tailed deer harvest in 2023: 19,828
- 2022 harvest total: 19,182
- Overall hunter success rate: 40.3%
- Antlered: 13,741
- Antlerless: 6,088
- Taken during general hunts: 18,548 (38% success rate)
- Taken during controlled hunts: 1,281 (40% success rate)

If you've been waiting for some good news, well here it is.

White-tailed deer represented the biggest 'win' for the 2023 hunting season, as noted by the *upswing* in harvest numbers for the first time since 2019. An estimated 49,098 white-tailed deer hunters hit the woods last year, with 40% of those successfully bagging a deer. As predicted, heading into the 2023 hunting season overall harvest numbers for whitetails increased from 19,182 to 19,828.

Recall back in 2021, epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) wreaked havoc on the Clearwater region's whitetails, killing an estimated 6,000-10,000 deer that year. Like any species, it takes time for animals to rebound. Prior to the '23 hunting season, Boudreau forecasted "another 2-3 years" before the Clearwater's whitetail herds would be fully recovered, but optimistically pointed out that they were in fact "over the hump."

Overall, Idaho's white-tailed deer population outside the Clearwater Region is looking good. Fish and Game wildlife staff will continue to monitor the EHD and CWD situation among deer and elk populations during the summer and fall, as well as evaluate fawn survival rates upon the conclusion of this winter.



Please be mindful that even as April and early May come and the snow melts and hills begin to green that deer are still energetically stressed from previous winter conditions and its effect on their bodies. Deer go into the winter with their groceries on their back in the form of fat — the less they are stressed and pushed around on the winter ranges, even during early spring, is an important factor in their survival and the health of their future offspring.