

## Idaho 2024 Deer & Elk Hunting Outlook August 30, 2024

Idaho Fish and Game

Statewide, deer and elk hunting in Idaho looks promising after a tough season in 2023.

Elk, the stalwarts of the mountains generally speaking, have stayed relatively healthy and stable. Statewide, mule deer numbers also appear to be improving, while eastern Idaho's muleys—after suffering from one of the worst winters on record in 2023—are starting to gradually grow thanks to a much-needed mild winter. While scorching summer temperatures usually present the threat of epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) in white-tailed deer, so far, there's no sign of any significant outbreaks this year.



If we're going to lead with good news, then we probably ought to start with elk. Overall, the numbers for Idaho elk are once again looking steady and impressive.

Fish and Game's Deer and Elk Coordinator Toby Boudreau believes we will see much of the same, if not better conditions, for elk this fall.

*“Overall, elk populations are looking good,” Boudreau said. “We saw 87% of collared elk calves and 96% of collared cows make it through the winter, which is a few percentages higher than most years.”*

Mule deer also appear to be heading in the right direction—including those in eastern Idaho. Winter survival is typically the driving factor for mule deer herds, and the long-term average is about 60% of fawns surviving their first winter, but during hard winters that can be significantly lower.

To monitor herds, Fish and Game biologists captured and collared 217 mule deer fawns and 168 does in early winter in various parts of the state to track their winter survival. Of those collared, 77% of fawns and 95% of does made it through to spring.

“It’s going to take a few more years for mule deer to rebound in that part of the state, but a few more mild winters and I think fawns in particular will continue to trend in the right direction,” Boudreau said.

And as for whitetails, which saw the only hunter harvest *increase* among the three species, the news appears good...at least for now.

Hot summers and white-tailed deer can sometimes turn into a storm cloud of potential EHD outbreaks, seen as recently as 2021. There have been no such reports, but Fish and Game wildlife officials are encouraging folks to keep an eye out for deer showing signs of the disease.

EHD outbreaks usually occur during later summer and before the first frost when hot, dry conditions cause animals to congregate at watering areas where gnats – which carry and transmit the disease – are also likely to be. Assuming we avoid an outbreak, whitetail herds should continue to rebound.



### **Last Year's Harvest**

In 2023, hunters harvested 18,568 elk, 18,329 mule deer, and 19,828 white-tailed deer. Elk harvest was down 11% from 2022, while as predicted, mule deer harvest dropped a whopping 22% statewide. Whitetails represented the sole tick in the upward direction, accounting for a 3% increase from last year.

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.

A total of 74,503 mule deer hunters hunted fall 2023, 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 unusually large mule deer harvests in 2015 and 2016 (both years over 37,000 deer harvested) that spiked the 10-year average.

As for elk...it was a good run. Last year 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.

That drop was unexpected, but within normal fluctuations in annual elk harvests, and probably doesn't reflect a drop in the elk population. Chances are good we will see that bounce back up above 20,000, but that depends on how many hunters go after elk, and what weather conditions they experience.

White-tailed deer harvest has been at the top of bad news headlines in recent years due to disease outbreaks; however, in 2023, whitetail harvest showed a slight 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.

For the full 2023 deer and elk harvest stats, [check out this earlier story](#).



## **Elk Hunting**

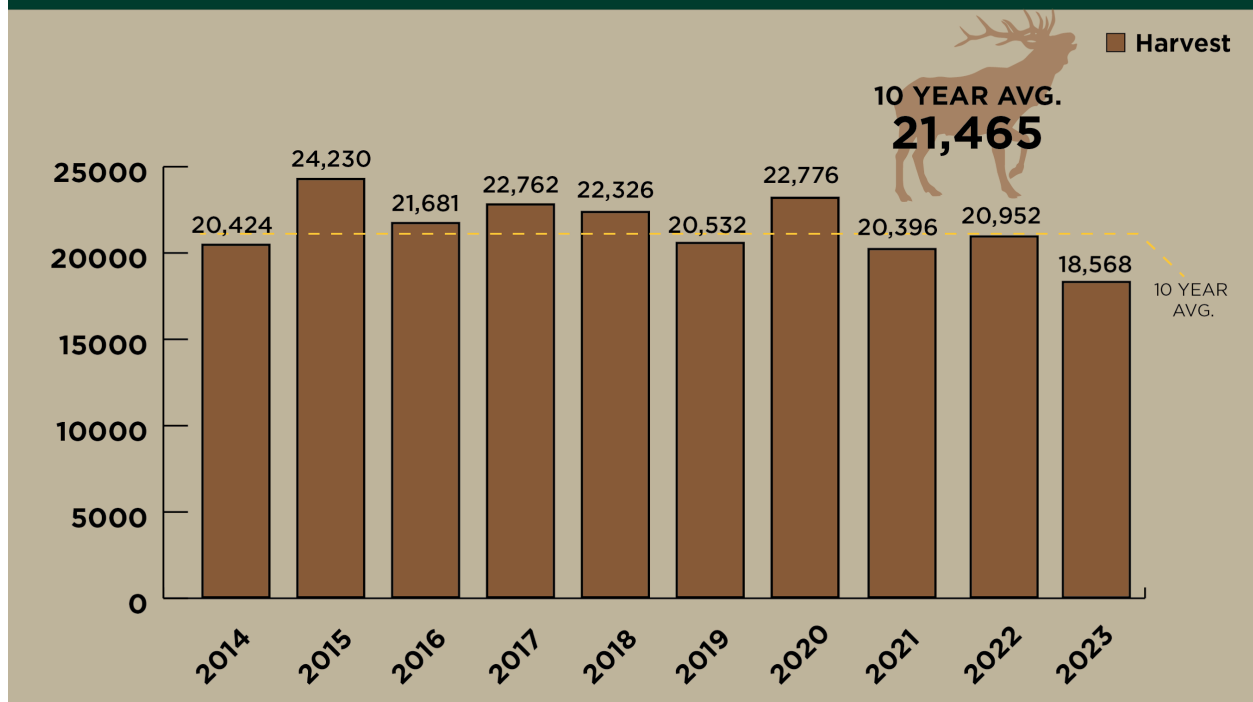
The most notable statistic from the 2023 elk season? 18,568 total elk harvested, which is down 11% from the previous year and marks the first time since 2013 the statewide harvest dropped below 20,000.

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.

Elk populations tend to swing less dramatically than deer, and elk numbers have been relatively consistent in past years. So, what might've caused the decline?

It's difficult to prove exactly what caused the drop, but Boudreau believes seasonal elk distribution during hunting season may have contributed.

# ELK 10 YEAR HARVEST



“We had a lot of elk stay in their high-country summer ranges longer than usual, and that made them less accessible to hunters, especially hunters with controlled hunt tags limited to a specific area. Elk were not being in those traditional hunting areas likely reduced overall harvest,” Boudreau said.

Hunters will see similar, if not better, elk populations this fall. Harvests should be at or above the 10-year average, which continues to be at a near-record number.

While that’s all good news, hunters are reminded that elk are highly nomadic, and there are no guarantees they will be where in the same places they were in the past. Hunters need to be diligent at finding areas where elk want to be, and not dwell in areas without fresh sign of elk in the area.

## Last Year’s 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)



Idaho mule deer hunting should improve after hunters last fall saw the unfortunate results of the catastrophic 2022-23 winter, particularly in eastern Idaho.

Last year's mule deer harvest dropped 22 percent statewide compared with the prior year, but wildlife managers expect to see it start ticking back up thanks to a mild winter and excellent 77% average fawn survival statewide. (More on that later.)

This brings us to 2024 and the proverbial question of whether the glass will be half empty or half full? It's largely a matter of perspective. Hunters won't see the big mule deer herds they saw a few years back, but hopefully, they will see more deer than last fall.

"I think we're clawing our way out of the hole," Boudreau said.

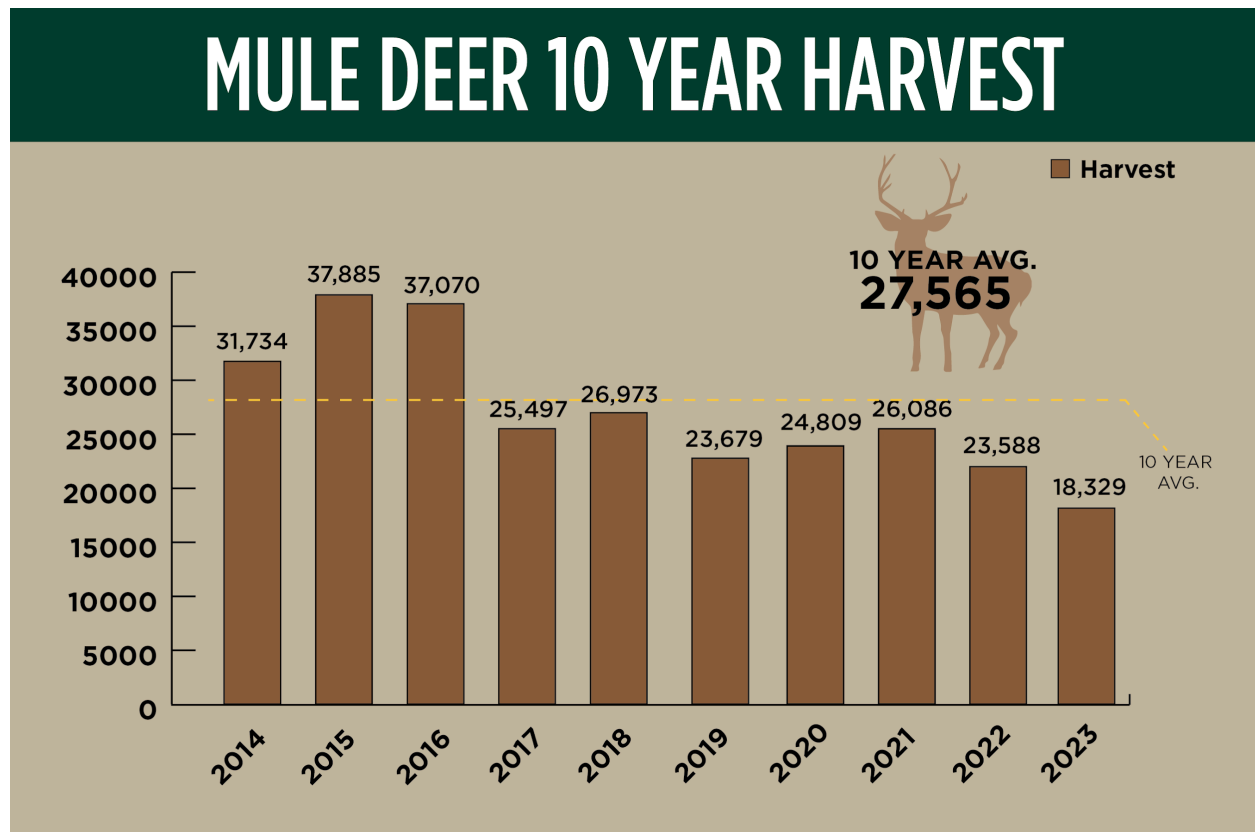
However, it takes more than one mild winter to really boost mule deer herds, and there's an echo effect that lingers after a hard winter.

Mule deer does that are heavily stressed by winter typically bear lighter-than-average fawns the following spring, which survive at lower rates than heavier fawns. That phenomenon was reflected by lower fawn survival in eastern Idaho than in west and central Idaho.

*"Unless we see another hard winter, we should be out of that lag period by next spring and see heavier fawns that are better able to survive," Boudreau said.*

While hunter harvest is one way of "keeping score" on the health of mule deer herds, it can be an unreliable measuring stick because when herds are large and healthy, Fish and Game can offer more antlerless tags. Those antlerless tags are cut back - or not reinstated - after hard winters to allow herds to rebound as quickly as possible.

Dropping those antlerless tags drops the statewide mule deer harvest because antlerless hunts tend to have higher success rates than buck-only hunts.





Which leads us to buck hunting. With most of the state's hunters focused on bucks, and last year's healthy fawn crop that survived winter mean more young antlered bucks that will be sporting spikes, forked-horn antlers, and a small percentage will be three-points. Those young bucks represent a large portion of the annual buck harvest, so it's likely hunters will see an uptick in the fall harvest.

As for older bucks, that will likely be a mixed bag. Fawns killed during the 2022-23 winter obviously aren't coming back, so that void in the buck population will remain for several years. But that's not to say there won't be any mature bucks, just likely fewer than after years of back-to-back normal or mild winters.

Buck survival through winter and hunting seasons can vary considerably depending on where you are in the state, so hunters can still find mature bucks, but not likely in the numbers they saw prior to the 2022-23 winter.

Overall, mule deer hunters have some reason for optimism, especially in the west and central parts of the state. They will hopefully see a few more mule deer in eastern Idaho, but it will take longer for herds to rebuild there.

#### Last Year's 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)

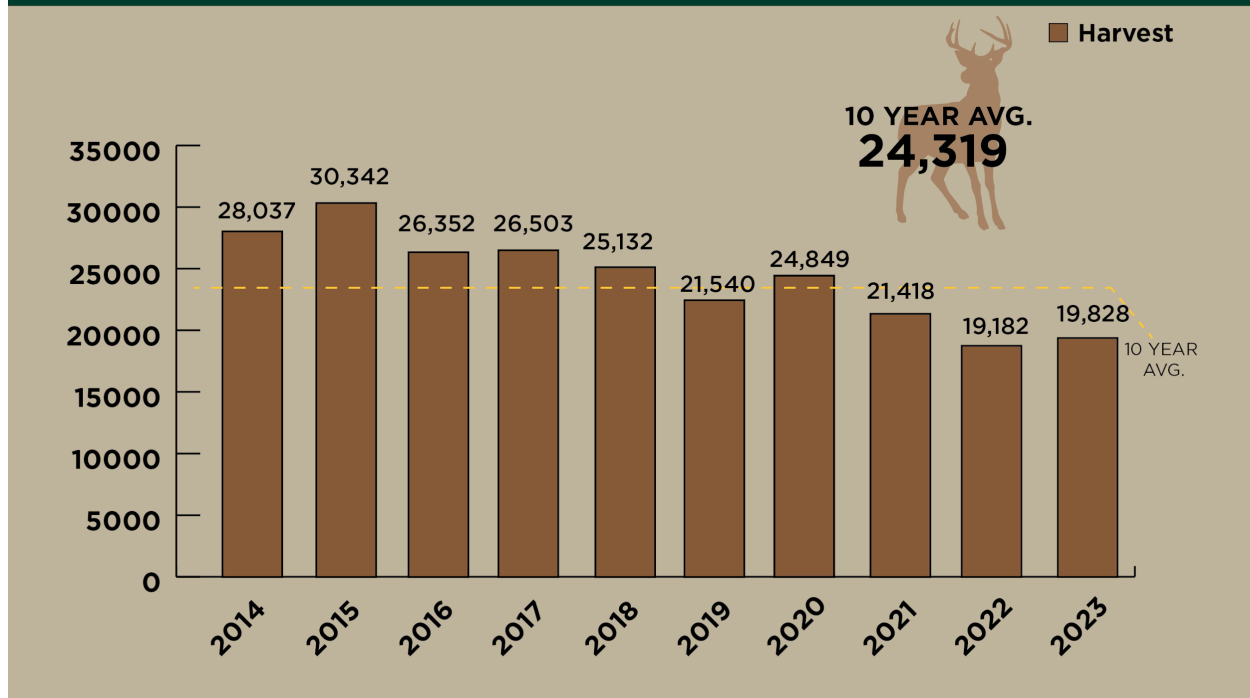


### **White-tailed Deer Hunting**

White-tailed deer represented the biggest “win” from 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, 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.

# WHITE-TAILED DEER 10 YEAR HARVEST



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.”

“I like where we’re at this year with whitetails, and while not fully recovered, I am hopeful hunters will see more of them in the Clearwater Region, and similar numbers in the Panhandle and elsewhere,” Boudreau said.

Fish and Game wildlife staff will continue to monitor the EHD and CWD situation among deer populations during the remainder of summer and into fall, and deer hunters in the Panhandle need to be informed about what’s happening with latest CWD detection and how that could affect the fall hunts. (See more about CWD below.)

## Last Year’s 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)

### **What hunters need to know about chronic wasting disease for 2024**

Hunters play a critical role in testing for CWD since there is no live test for the disease, and getting accurate and current information requires annual testing. CWD is more manageable—and spreads slower—when only a small fraction of the herd is infected.

The CWD situation is changing and management is evolving. The disease was detected in a mule deer buck last fall in Unit 23 near New Meadows, and again in a whitetail doe found dead in July of this year in Unit 1 near Bonners Ferry in the Panhandle.



Fish and Game has the following CWD rules for the 2024 hunting season:

- Unit 18 is now included with Unit 14 to form the CWD Management Zone. Unit 15 was removed after extensive testing found no animals with CWD there.
- Hunters who harvest a deer, elk, or moose in the CWD Management Zone cannot transport whole carcasses and certain animal parts outside of Units 14 and 18. For details on special rules, see the [CWD webpage](#).
- Mandatory CWD testing no longer applies to elk and moose, which are less susceptible to CWD than deer. However, Fish and Game will still accept voluntary samples from hunter-harvested deer, elk, and moose anywhere in the state.
- Mandatory CWD testing of all harvested deer continues in Unit 14 and now includes Unit 18 as well. Sampling of harvested deer in Unit 15 is no longer required, but we'd still like samples from interested hunters.
- New for 2024, CWD testing is also mandatory in Units 23, 24, and 32A for deer, but carcass transport rules do not apply.

In an effort to prevent the further spread of CWD and to manage populations with CWD, Fish and Game has developed a strategic plan to guide the state's response and management actions when animals test positive in an area.

Hunters can take heads or lymph nodes of harvested deer, elk, and moose to any regional Fish and Game office for CWD testing, or get directions on the [Fish and Game website](#) on how to collect and submit samples themselves.





## Mandatory Hunter Reports

Hunters are reminded fill out their report 10 days after harvest, or if the hunter did not hunt or harvest (deer, elk, and pronghorn only), 10 days after the closing date of their season for each tag purchased.

When you file your Mandatory Hunter Report, you give critical hunt and harvest information to wildlife managers to maximize and sustain healthy herds. Help us collect this vital information and conserve your hunting, fishing, and trapping dollars. For more information, check out Fish and Game's [Mandatory Hunter Report webpage](#).

## Season setting for 2025-26 hunts

A reminder to all big game hunters: Season setting for 2025-26 big game seasons starts this winter with the commission approving seasons in March. Hunters should keep an eye out for upcoming season proposals, open houses, and opportunities to comment on proposed changes. Check the website for details.



Here's a detailed deer and elk outlook for each region



## PANHANDLE REGION

### Elk

The Panhandle Region experienced a relatively mild winter with lower snow falling over winter range. The lack of snow should have allowed elk to move easily and find adequate forage throughout most of the winter. Overwinter elk calf survival in Unit 4 was high, at 90%.

Winter broke and spring weather began early, with increased snow melt at lower elevations, allowing for an earlier-than-normal green up on the mountain. Cool spring weather continued through June and should have produced decent forage conditions going into summer.

While seasonal weather trends have their effects, Units 1, 4, and 6 continue to be among the highest producing elk units in the state, and hunters will again have plenty of elk to pursue come fall.

### Deer

While deer are generally more sensitive to weather, the Panhandle also saw good over-winter survival of fawns and adults. The region has plenty of great white-tailed deer hunting areas, particularly Units 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6—which are among the top 10 units in the state for white-tailed deer harvest.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Beginning in the hunting seasons of 2023, general season antlerless elk hunting opportunity was removed from both the A and B tags in Unit 4 due to concerns regarding elk population performance in that area.

Hunters across the Panhandle should remain [vigilant in their bear awareness and identification skills](#) as they hit the woods this fall. In the Panhandle, grizzly bears are

mostly found in Unit 1, but have been sometimes documented in Units 2, 3, 4, 4A, 6, 7, and 9. Black bears are common throughout most of the region.

Panhandle hunters should also remember to check Fish and Game's website for information on the [Large Tracts Program](#) for access and motorized restrictions. It is important to remember these lands are private, with rules set in place by the landowner, and respecting these rules will help ensure that access continues to be available.

For those returning to, or passing through, the Panhandle from hunting in other states, remember there are carcass transport rules in place from CWD-positive states and management zones. Check the regulations before moving your harvested animals.

– Micah Ellstrom, Regional Wildlife Manager



## CLEARWATER REGION

### Elk

Populations, harvest numbers, and harvest success have remained stable in the Palouse Zone, and these trends are expected to continue during the 2024 season. In the Dworshak Zone, 2023 hunter success rates reached a 5-year high, and total harvest was comparable to recent years. However, surveys indicate that populations may have declined in the Dworshak Zone over the past decade, and changes are being monitored closely.

Unit 14 continues to serve as the strong point for the Elk City Zone with increasing populations supporting the majority of the zone's elk, elk harvest, and hunters, while elk numbers in Units 15 and 16 remain below long-term averages.

Elk numbers and harvest remain relatively low in the Lolo, Selway, and Hells Canyon zones. Yet, recent improvements in the number of calves observed provide a positive outlook for upcoming seasons. Additionally, strong elk numbers have been observed in specific portions of these zones.

## Mule Deer

The Snake and Salmon River breaks harbor the region's strongest mule deer populations. Harvest opportunities along the Snake and Salmon are limited to controlled hunts in Units 11, 13, 14, and 18 to provide sustainable hunting opportunity that supports the longevity of these populations.

Mule deer occupy other reaches of the Clearwater Region at lower densities. General seasons with reasonable mule deer hunting opportunities are available along the Clearwater River in Units 8, 8A, 10A, and 15.

Additionally, for those hunters willing to put in the effort to hunt the backcountry, Units 16A, 17, 19, and 20 can be good—but challenging—hunting opportunities during general season mule deer.

## White-tailed Deer

Trends in harvest, harvest success, and hunter numbers continue to reflect robust white-tailed deer populations throughout the Clearwater. Regional buck harvest and the proportion of bucks harvested with five or more points on an antler also continue to remain strong.

Upswings in hunter success and harvest across northern agricultural Units 8, 8A, and 11A indicate white-tailed deer populations are recovering well from the 2021 epizootic hemorrhagic disease outbreak that caused severe impacts to local populations along the Clearwater River corridor. White-tailed deer hunting opportunities are plentiful across the region, and hunters should experience high-quality hunting conditions this season.

## What hunters should be aware of this fall

Fish and Game is collecting chronic wasting disease samples across the region and, CWD testing in Units 14 and 18 is mandatory. In addition, whole carcasses cannot be transported outside those units. See the CWD webpage for details. Hunters can submit



lymph nodes or heads of harvested animals to a regional office or sample drop-off location.

White-tailed deer hunters in Units 8A and 10A are reminded to submit a tooth (front incisor on lower jaw) from their harvest to learn the age of their deer and to help contribute to efforts to better understand age structure of harvested white-tailed deer in these units.

Hunters should be aware that treponeme-associated hoof disease (TAHD; aka hoofrot) has been detected in multiple units of the Clearwater Region. Elk harvested with TAHD are safe to consume. However, biologists are interested in documenting the occurrence of TAHD and ask sportsmen to report elk that have difficulty walking or have abnormal hooves, and to submit abnormal hooves of harvested elk to the department for testing.

Sportsmen are also asked to observe all off-road and on-road travel restrictions, and check for and abide by fire restrictions in your hunting area.

– Iver Hull, *Regional Wildlife Biologist*



## SOUTHWEST REGION

### **Southwest Region – McCall**

#### **Elk**

Elk herds remain at/or above objectives in most of the region apart from the Middle Fork Zone, which is still below objective. Wildlife staff last surveyed the McCall Zone in February 2022, and elk numbers are within management objectives.

Brownlee has a high ratio of bulls to cows, and harvest continues to trend up. However, hunters should expect that some of these elk will be challenging to hunt due to hunter numbers and private land access.

The Weiser River Zone remains above objective, but harvest success recently started to drop off due to an intentional reduction of herds in order to meet population objectives,

and antlerless opportunity was reduced on both the Weiser A and B tags in the last season setting cycle as a result.

## Deer

Deer fawns collared across the Weiser-McCall area saw average overwinter survival at just over 90%—the highest in the state. This follows four winters of above-average fawn survival and should result in good numbers of 1- to 5-year-old deer available to hunters this fall.

White-tailed deer herds are stable to slightly increasing across the region with the highest densities occurring in the northern portions.

Hunters pursuing mule deer on the regular deer tag are reminded that youth are restricted to harvesting antlered deer only in Units 23, 31, and 32A. In Units 22 and 32, youth may harvest antlered or antlerless animals during the first week. As with elk, deer hunters in Units 32 and 22 should keep in mind that the Paddock and Limepoint fires likely affected distribution of deer and elk in these units.

## What hunters should be aware of this fall

The biggest thing deer hunters need to be aware of this year is that CWD testing is now mandatory for mule deer and white-tailed deer harvested in units 23, 24, and 32A, [following the detection of a CWD-positive mule deer buck near the border of Units 23 and 32A last fall](#). Units 23, 24, and 32A are not within the CWD Management Zone, so carcass transportation restrictions do not apply. Hunters should refer to Fish and Game's CWD webpage for sampling information and locations.

Another consideration for hunters in the area this year is wildfires: With fires burning in Units 22, 32, 24, and 25, hunters should be sure to check [InciWeb](#) prior to heading out in the field for the most up-to-date fire information, including current fire boundaries and road and area closures.

– *Regan Berkley, Regional Wildlife Manager*

## **Southwest Region – Nampa**

### **Elk**

The Boise River Zone was last surveyed in 2021, which showed that both cows and bulls were over population objectives. Starting in 2023, the season for the Boise River B Tag was extended to begin earlier on Oct. 27. This increased opportunity, combined with hunters avoiding elk zones impacted heavily by the 2022-23 winter, resulted in a significant increase in hunter participation in the Boise River Zone. Despite this increased pressure on the zone, hunter success rates remained relatively consistent.

Both general season and controlled hunt tag holders should still experience an abundance of opportunity this season. Harvest metrics following this season will be monitored closely to ensure Boise River Zone is brought within population objectives in a controlled manner.

The Sawtooth Zone was last surveyed in 2023. Estimates of overwintering bulls showed a decline, while cow numbers increased when compared to the previous survey in 2017. However, it is important to remember that much of the huntable population migrates into the Sawtooth Zone in the spring and are, therefore, not observed during the winter aerial survey in that zone.

Over the last five years, regional staff have been tracking a small decline in general season success. To increase chances of success, B-tag hunters may want to plan their hunts earlier in the season to maximize their odds of encountering bulls before some migrate out of the zone.

Elk hunting in the Owyhee Zone, which is limited to controlled hunts, will continue to provide hunters with excellent opportunities to harvest mature bulls this fall. These herds are stable and/or increasing, which allows for controlled hunt antlerless opportunity in the zone that is intended to slow population growth.

### **Mule Deer**



With generous over-the-counter tags, any-weapon harvest seasons, and its proximity to Idaho's most populated area, Unit 39 is the state's most popular and productive unit for mule deer hunters. Fawn recruitment in Unit 39 was severely reduced following the winter of 2022-23. However, the low winter survival resulted in more available resources for surviving adults and fawns born in the spring of 2023. The composition survey flown in the early winter of 2023-24 saw an increase in antlered deer and a substantial increase in the ratio of fawns to does. Hunters in the field will likely encounter increased numbers of young bucks and a similar number of mature bucks compared to last year.

Mule deer in the southern portion of the Central Mountains (Units 33, 34, and 35) have experienced steady recovery since the winter of 2016-17, with multiple years of increasing buck-to-doe ratios observed during aerial flights through the winter of 2022-23. The composition survey flown this past winter saw a sharp decline in surveyed bucks. However, due to very mild winter conditions this past winter that allowed bucks to remain high, the survey likely did not encounter the entire male population. Hunters should expect mature bucks at low densities and have a similar hunting experience as recent years.

General season mule deer hunting opportunity in the Owyhee units is limited to bucks that are two points or less on at least one side (2-point bucks); and as a result, the harvest is largely comprised of yearlings. Hunters should have similar hunting experiences as past years during the general season. Late season hunters in the controlled hunts should expect mature bucks at low densities, but still expect a quality hunting experience in the desert.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Early season hunters should be aware of extensive access restrictions because of numerous active fires. The closures are currently pervasive in Units 33, 34, and 35. Hunters should consult Forest Service and BLM websites for updates on current closures.

Fish and Game is accepting samples from any and all hunter-harvested deer and elk in all units in the region. Hunters can submit lymph nodes or heads for sampling. Samples from deer and elk salvaged from vehicle collisions will also be accepted.

Wildlife managers are continuing to encourage antlerless harvest in the general season youth hunt and controlled hunts for Units 39 and 43. Unit 39 has been a very productive mule deer unit, and has been for a long time, but biologists have documented decreases in fawn production, a smaller number of fawns in proportion to the number of does, and a decline in winter weights of fawns—all of which suggest the deer herd is approaching the top end of what the habitat can support.

– Ryan Walrath, *Regional Wildlife Manager*; David Bernasconi, *Regional Wildlife Biologist*; Rachel Curtis, *Regional Wildlife Biologist*



## MAGIC VALLEY REGION

### Elk

Elk herds in the Magic Valley Region are at or above population objectives across all zones after being well over objective for several years. Future management will focus on maintaining moderate elk herd growth while still offering some over-the-counter opportunities as a chance for family and friends to hunt together in areas with healthy elk herds.

Average winter snowpack and moderate spring temperatures have created good habitat conditions for elk. Summer temperatures throughout the region have been high, and forage will continue to dry out if the region does not receive any late summer or fall precipitation. Continued hot and dry conditions into the fall may lead to local shifts in elk distribution to wetter foraging habitats.

Cow elk harvest is largely dictated by weather, and without early snow this fall, hunters can expect to find elk at higher elevations than previous hunting seasons. The best elk hunting will be in areas away from roads and motorized trails.

## Mule Deer

Mule deer numbers in the Magic Valley Region have been slowly increasing over the last several years. Over-winter mule deer fawn survival in 2023-24 was excellent, approaching 80%. High fawn survival should result in numerous yearling bucks on the mountain this fall.

Like elk, average winter snowpack and moderate spring temperatures produced favorable habitat conditions for mule deer, which could result in above average antler growth. While the summer has been hot and dry, good spring forage conditions typically mean deer will be found in smaller, more isolated groups.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

As part of Fish and Game's ongoing CWD surveillance program, regional staff are interested in collecting heads or lymph nodes from adult deer throughout the region. Hunters can have their deer sampled at the Magic Valley regional office during office hours (8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday) or drop off a head or lymph node sample at a freezer located next to the Magic Valley region's hunter education building.

– Mike McDonald, Regional Wildlife Manager



## SOUTHEAST REGION

### Elk

Hunters should expect good elk hunting again this fall. Winter conditions this past year were favorable where calf and adult survival were above average. As a result, elk populations should be similar to, or slightly higher, compared to what hunters experienced last fall.

Biologists surveyed the Diamond Creek and Bear River Zones in 2023, and the population estimates remain within objective. In the Bannock and Big Desert Zones

aerial surveys are not conducted, however harvest and hunter success rates have remained stable.

## Mule Deer

Although this past winter was much more favorable for mule deer, populations remain suppressed from the 2022-23 winter. Hunter success rates in 2023 were some of the lowest recorded in decades. This coming fall there should be more yearlings on the landscape, and hunters should see a few more deer compared to 2023; however, low abundance coupled with small increases in recruitment will mean another challenging year for mule deer hunters.

Overall, biologists are anticipating continued low hunter success rates, total harvest, and hunter participation because of the lingering effects of the 2022-23 winter.

On the bright side, mule deer came out of this past winter in good condition, which should result in healthy fawns. Range conditions with the above average snowpack and intermittent rain through the summer should benefit mule deer as they enter the fall and winter months.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Weather conditions during the hunting season can affect big game behavior and distribution—and thus, hunter success. Doing some scouting of potential hunting areas may give hunters an idea of animal distribution and behavior. Hunters can also use preseason scouting to check road and trail conditions, as well as make landowner contacts if they are planning to hunt on private property.

– Zach Lockyer, Southeast Region Wildlife Manager



# UPPER SNAKE REGION

Elk



Elk numbers and elk hunting should be good across the Upper Snake Region this fall. All of the region's elk zones are currently at/or above management objectives for both bulls and cows. Hot and dry conditions could impact elk behavior and distributions during early seasons, but elk densities should be similar to (if not better) than last year.

One area where hunters might notice fewer elk than in years past would be in Unit 63. Management strategies have been implemented to reduce overall elk populations across the desert in Unit 63 due to excessive agricultural damage. Harvest opportunities were adjusted to increase harvest in Unit 63 for the 2023 and 2024 hunting seasons, and managers are very interested in how these changes might impact elk harvest and agriculture conflicts.

### Mule Deer

Mule deer populations in the Upper Snake region experienced a significant decline due to the harsh winter of 2022-23, which resulted in nearly no fawns surviving and a significant increase in adult deer mortality.

In contrast, the winter of 2023-24 was milder, with fawn survival improving, but still varying across the region. Data indicates that mule deer survival rates for the 2023-24 winter were strong (80-90% fawn survival) in the northern and western portions of the region, such as Sand Creek and Mountain Valleys, and more moderate survival (40-50% fawn survival) in the more southern units like 66 and 69.

With the improved fawn recruitment, hunter success is expected to be better when compared to last year, though it will likely remain below the long-term average. Although more yearling bucks (spikes and 2-points) are anticipated this year, it will take several consecutive mild winters for the mule deer population to recover and see substantial increases across all age classes.

### White-tailed Deer

While the harsh winter of 2022-23 also impacted white-tailed deer survival, the effect was less severe than on mule deer. During the 2023 hunting season, a minor decline in

hunter success was observed. However, with the more moderate conditions last winter, hunter success is expected to return to historic averages this year.

– *Curtis Hendricks, Regional Wildlife Manager*



## SALMON REGION

### Elk

Hunters should see good harvest opportunity again this season because most of the elk zones are either at or above objective. The region experienced a mild winter followed by a drier-than-usual spring and summer. These dry conditions may lead to early-season elk being found in higher elevations where forage quality is better.

For our Montana border units, this may mean lower-than-normal numbers of early-season elk on the Idaho side due to the wetter climate and greener forage on the Montana side. These elk will migrate onto Idaho winter ranges as the fall progresses and winter approaches.

Elk numbers in the Middle Fork Salmon River appear to be holding steady but will still be in low densities across the wilderness. Hunters in this low-density landscape are encouraged to use their optics and boots to cover as much ground as possible to locate small herds of elk and be successful in harvesting a bull.

### Mule Deer

Mule deer numbers are stable to increasing, and wildlife managers are expecting a good general season this year. The Salmon Region experienced a mild winter, and overwinter deer survival was good across the region. The region is managed under a primarily general season structure. And although mule deer are common, the rugged terrain of the region typically leads to moderate hunter success rates. Mule deer can be found throughout the region, but densities tend to be highest in the western half of the region.

## White-tailed Deer

White-tailed deer have become common in the Salmon Region over the past several decades. A liberal general season offers opportunity to pursue them from August through December. Hunters should note that most whitetails are found on private property, and hunters are responsible for obtaining permission before entering private land to hunt. Although they may occasionally be found on public lands, access to consistent whitetail hunting is limited in this region.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Hunters headed to the field in the Salmon Region do not need to have their sights set on just deer or elk. The region offers the opportunity to pursue a mixed bag. Besides deer and elk, there are robust populations of mountain lions, black bears, upland game birds, and wolves in the region.

All bear, lion, and wolf hunting opportunity in the region is managed under a general over-the-counter tag structure. In addition, the wilderness portions of Units 21A and 28 and all of Unit 27 offer two bear and lion tag opportunities at a reduced price.

– *Dennis Newman, Regional Wildlife Manager*