Idaho's 2015 Whitetail Harvest Sets All-Time Record

By Roger Phillips, Idaho Fish and Game public information specialist

Fish and Game predicted a banner hunting season for 2015, and hunters delivered with the highest all-time whitetail harvest and increased deer and elk harvests over 2014.

Hunters took an estimated 30,568 whitetails in 2015, topping the 1996 record of 29,800. The combined estimated mule deer and whitetail harvest was 68,764, which exceeded the 2014 harvest of 61,200, and it was the highest deer harvest since 1991. The mule deer harvest was also 5,200 more than in 2014.

Clearwater Regional Wildlife Biologist Dave Koehler said he was a little surprised to see a record whitetail harvest considering hunting conditions weren't ideal due to warm, dry weather in the fall. But he added that trends were pointing in that direction.

"Both harvest and hunter participation for whitetails has been on an upward trend since 1973," Koehler said.

He noted that the outbreak of bluetongue last summer hit some localized whitetail herds, but had little effect on the overall population. He also doesn't think there was an overharvest from the record take of whitetails.

"None of the data we have suggests that's the case," he said.

Overall success rate for deer hunters in 2015, including general seasons and controlled hunts, was a whopping 45 percent.

Elk hunters also had a good season by harvesting 24,543 elk and exceeding the 2014 harvest of 20,700. Combined hunter success for general elk seasons and controlled hunts was 27 percent. The 2015 elk harvest was the highest since 1996 and also the fifth-consecutive increased harvest.

Big-game harvests have been trending upward thanks in part to several consecutive mild winters and growing hunter numbers, including non-residents.

The harvest was bolstered by increases in doe and cow tags, which accounted for 28 percent of the deer harvest and 44 percent of the elk harvest.

Further breakdowns of the 2015 harvest showed that hunters took 83 percent of the deer and 61 percent of the elk during general seasons.

While controlled hunts accounted for a smaller percentage of the harvest, hunters who drew them had excellent success rates. About 60 percent of deer hunters and 45 percent of elk hunters who drew controlled-hunt tags took an animal.

Not surprising, the number of hunters was also up in 2015. Sales of deer and elk tags increased 6 percent in 2015 over 2014, and last year, the 14,000 limit on non-resident deer tags sold out for the first time since 2008. That triggered the release of another 1,500 whitetail tags to accommodate late-season hunters.

Hunting statistics also showed a good mix of age classes for deer and elk.
The bull elk harvest was about 25 percent spikes, 38 percent between two and five points (on at least one antler), and 36 percent six points or larger.

The buck harvest was about 54 percent spikes to three points (on at least one antler), 32 percent four points and 14 percent five points or more.

Archery and muzzleloader hunters accounted for 23 percent of the elk harvest and 7 percent of the deer harvest.

Winter big-game monitoring is showing signs that bode well for the 2016 big game seasons.

Based on preliminary data from radio collared deer, 86 percent of fawns had survived through February. Monitoring is showing slightly lower fawn and doe survival than in the last two years, but those years had the highest over-winter survival since 1998 when Fish and Game started intensive monitoring herds.

Biologists will continue to closely monitor survival through spring, and March is among the worst months for deer mortality.

Elk are less susceptible to winter kill than deer, and through February, 99 percent of radio collared cow elk had survived, and 90 percent of the collared calves.

How harvests statistics are compiled

Although big-game harvest reports are "mandatory," about 60 percent of big game hunters fill them out and return them to Fish and Game. The department then calls hunters who drew a deer or elk controlled hunt, but did not file their hunt reports. It also takes a random sample of general season hunters who did not file hunter reports, and combines all that data to come up with the annual harvest estimates.

2015 by the numbers

Deer
- Deer hunters: 151,799
- Total deer harvest: 68,764
- Overall success: 45 percent
- 2014 harvest: 61,200
- 2015 whitetail deer harvest: 30,568 (new all-time record)
- 2015 total deer harvest (mule deer and whitetails) was the highest since 1991.

Elk
- Elk hunters: 90,206

- Total elk harvest: 24,543
- Success rate: 27 percent
- 2014 harvest: 20,700
- 2015 elk harvest was the highest harvest since 1996