

Big game hunters should have good hunting for 2021, but there are some disease concerns

By Roger Phillips, Public Information Supervisor

Monday, August 23, 2021 - 11:51 AM MDT

Rebounding herds should provide lots of hunting opportunity during fall hunts

If you want the quick version of what the 2021 big game season is likely to look like, here it is: similar to last year for elk, mule deer and white-tailed deer. There's been no dramatic changes to the statewide populations for those animals up or down, and the statewide harvests for 2021 should also be similar to 2020.

However, biologists are closely tracking a disease outbreak among deer herds in the Clearwater area, and it's too early to tell how that may affect the larger population and fall hunts.

In 2020, hunters harvested 22,776 elk, 24,809 mule deer and 24,849 whitetails. Elk harvest was above the 10-year average, and deer harvests were slightly below it. Success rates were 23 percent for elk hunters, 28 percent for mule deer hunters and 44 percent for whitetail hunters.



Roger Phillips/Idaho Fish and Game

Thanks in part to a relatively mild winter and healthy herds in most parts of the state, Fish and Game Deer/Elk Coordinator Rick Ward expects 2021 harvests will meet, or possibly exceed, last year's harvest because there are plenty of animals available, but there are also some changes that could affect that.

As usual, there's more to the big picture

Idaho's big game harvest over the last decade has generally stayed within the bounds of normal fluctuations and been fairly predictable. For example, elk harvests rose to about 20,000 animals in 2014 and have stayed above that number ever since and reflect a healthy, robust and relatively stable population, which is likely to continue.

Mule deer populations tend to have more spikes and drops, which is largely driven by weather, or more specifically, winters. Mild winters like last winter typically mean growing herds, or at minimum, stable ones.

Hard winters mean lower fawn survival and fewer young bucks the following fall, and severe winters kill a significant number of the adults, and herds may take years to recover. That is also reflected in the mule deer harvest over the last five years after herds and harvests took a substantial hit after the 2016-17 winter.

“Mule deer are kind of the poster child for boom and bust populations,” Ward said.

White-tailed deer populations tend to be a little more stable than mule deer populations, but they are still affected by weather and disease. Over the last decade, whitetail harvests have not fluctuated as much as mule deer, and Idaho’s whitetail harvests have been at, or near, historic levels in recent years. Last year also marked the third time in the last 10 years the state’s whitetail harvest exceeded the mule deer harvest.

“If you think back a few decades, that would have been unimaginable,” Ward said.

Read more about [2020 harvest stats](#).

2021 season includes significant regulation changes

While hunters should have plenty of opportunities to harvest game, there is a significant change that could affect the overall harvest.

The Fish and Game Commission changed nonresident tags for 2021 and nonresidents are more restricted than in the past. Nonresidents participation is limited in all deer and elk hunts, and for the first time, nonresident are only allowed to hunt in one unit during general deer hunts, and their numbers are also limited in each elk zone, as well as a statewide cap on nonresident deer and elk tags.

The intent was to redistribute nonresidents throughout the state and restrict their ability to hunt multiple units for deer. What effect those changes will have on harvest and overall hunter success remains to be seen.

“Hunters are going to adjust to the new system and figure things out,” Ward said. “But it’s going to take a year or two for the dust to settle.”

There’s also the wildcard that affects harvest: fall weather. North and Central Idaho are experiencing a major wildlife season, which could affect archery deer and elk seasons that start Aug. 30.

There was also a disease outbreak detected among whitetails in the Kamiah area in Late July and August. Biologists are getting reports the outbreak may be more widespread and is likely to affect more herds in the Clearwater area.

Resident elk hunters are reminded that if they want to exchange an elk tag for another zone that could be limited by wildfires, or access restrictions, they must do so before their hunting season starts. For many archery hunts, that's Aug. 30.

To get details about fires see the [Fire Information webpage](#).

How deer and elk populations are monitored

Big game managers throughout the state are constantly looking at data that provides details on how herds are fairing and whether they are growing or declining. Harvest stats are one way biologists track populations, and aerial surveys are done periodically in most areas to gauge population trends over time.



Siggy Nowak from Pixaby

Each winter, biologists in Central, Southern and Eastern Idaho capture fawns and elk calves during winter and fit them with telemetry collars.

Those young animals are monitored until late spring to see how many survive, and survival rates are applied to the larger population to get an estimate of how many animals were added.

Statewide, 77 percent of collared elk calves and 64 percent of mule deer fawns that were collared during winter survived through the end of April. That compares with 77 percent and 65 percent through the same period in 2020.

Fish and Game has been monitoring winter survival of fawns for 23 years, and the average survival of fawns is about 57 percent, which means two years of above-average survival for mule deer fawns and growing herds.

“Fawn weights, which indicate how likely they are to survive winter, were high in many places in southern Idaho when we captured and collared fawns in December and January. These are the conditions that lead to herd growth,” Ward said.

Ward added that fawn survival is not uniform, and it ranged from 50-85 percent in 2021, depending on where the fawns were collared. Elk have not been trapped and collared for as long as mule deer, and elk calves typically survive at a higher rate than mule deer fawns.

Since researchers began collaring elk calves in 2014-15, survival has ranged from a low of about 52 percent in 2016-17 to a high of 84 percent in 2014-15, so last winter’s 77 percent survival is at the upper end of that range and signals herd growth.

Biologists also collar some adult does and cows, which typically survive at a high rate, but serve as an early warning if they start dying during hard winter.

Read more about [2019-20 winter deer and elk survival](#)

Winter collaring and fawn monitoring are unfeasible in the northern parts of the state, but Fish and Game has started to incorporate data gathered from its extensive use of game cameras for monitoring wildlife populations.

The method involves taking millions of photos, and using sophisticated computer software to sift through them and applying mathematical modeling to get deer and elk population estimates at the game unit level.

“We are confident we have a method that will measure deer and elk abundance in North Idaho,” Ward said. “But we have nothing to compare it to in some areas, so this will be our new yardstick.”

Ward noted that getting populations estimates is only part of the project, and biologists are also trying to learn what drives, and limits, deer and elk populations in the northern parts of the state.

Elk population is like a rising tide

While deer populations can be boom or bust, elk populations are almost more like the tides gradually rising and ebbing, but there's been little ebbing in recent years. Hunter harvest of elk in Idaho is near the highest it's ever been with some caveats. Some of that harvest has shifted from the traditional backcountry and wilderness areas to more "front country," and recent harvests also include a higher number of depredation hunts where elk are damaging crops. But there remains plenty of elk for hunters to pursue in most regions of the state, including lots of general hunting opportunities.

"Elk populations, particularly those in Southern Idaho, are robust," Ward said.



Roger Phillips/Idaho Fish and Game

Southern Idaho, the Panhandle and Eastern Idaho have continued to produce lots elk, as well as some of Central Idaho, but portions of the Clearwater country and wilderness areas in Central Idaho continue to struggle, or hold their own, at lower populations than were seen in recent decades.

"We don't have an elk population issue," Ward said. "But we have an elk distribution issue."

He noted that even where elk herds are strong and healthy, things can change. Unlike deer that have either a small home range, such as whitetails, or predictable summer and winter ranges like mule deer, elk tend to be more nomadic.

"Elk behavior is radically different than deer," he said.

Elk herds may leave an area and find a new one and not return, and when that new area happens to be agriculture land where elk damage crops, biologists face an unenviable task of trying to change elk behavior or significantly reduce those herds while otherwise prime elk hunting terrain on public land may have fewer animals.

So with a solid and stable elk population and lots of interest in elk hunting, will the statewide harvest be above or below last year?

"I would say below, but not by a lot, because there will be fewer nonresident hunters," Ward said.

ELK 10 YEAR HARVEST



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Mule deer herds bouncing back, but not back yet

Mule deer hunters may already be pining for the "good ol' days" pre 2017 when five consecutive moderate and mild winters allowed herds to grow and hunters reaped the rewards.



Roger Phillips/Idaho Fish and Game

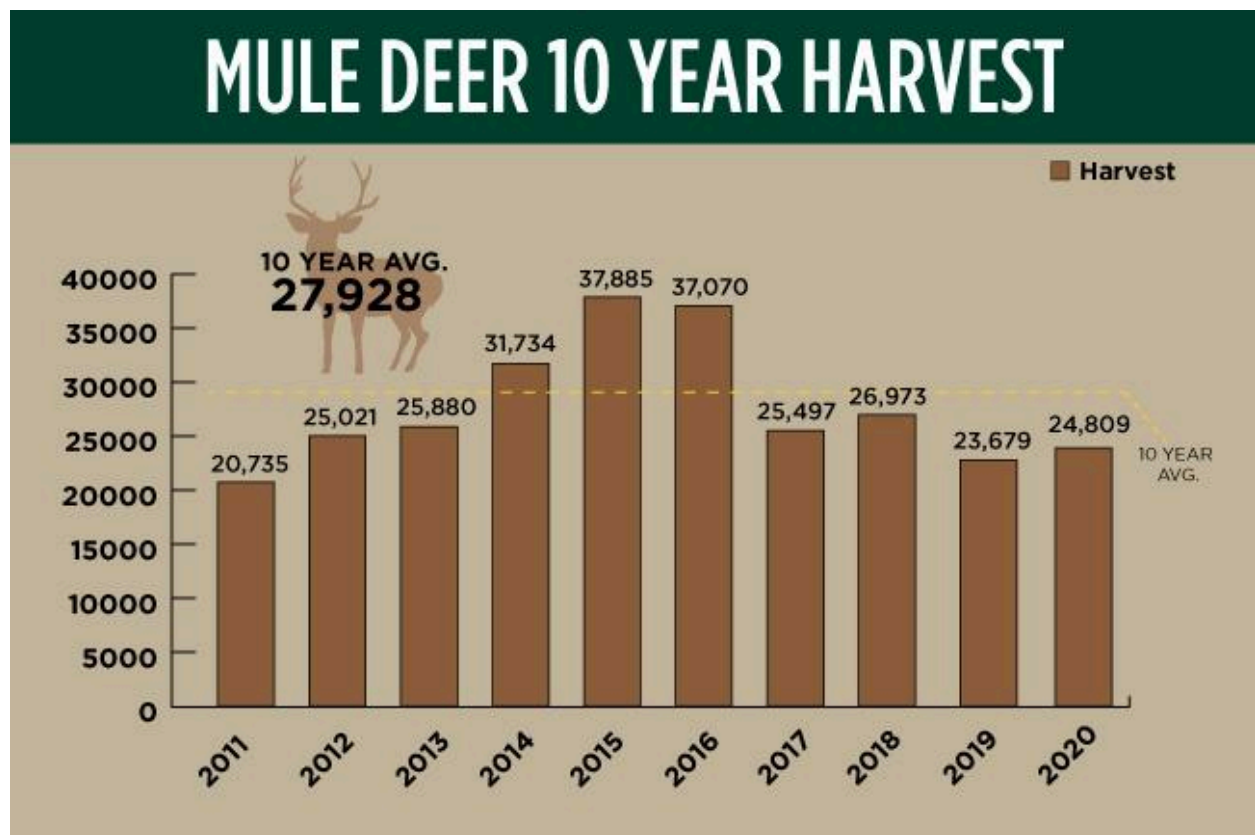
The severe winter of 2016-17 “reset the clock” for mule deer, Ward said. Herds are heading in the right direction, but still haven’t completely bounced back.

“Fawn survival the last two winters has been above average, which should translate to more deer,” he said.

However, mule deer are also found across a variety of habitats and elevations throughout the state, so all herds aren’t rebounding at the same rate, and some may be decreasing.

Ward noted the Weiser area as an example. Mule deer herds dropped by about a third between population surveys conducted in 2010 and 2020, and can be largely attributed to the severe 2016-17 winter. It will likely take more moderate to mild winter for it to fully rebound, and there are no guarantees what weather winter will bring.

While fawn survival typically garners much of the attention because young bucks make up most of the harvest, mild winters also allow those bucks that survive their first winter and hunting season to grow into mature animals, so it's likely hunters will also have a better chance of finding more trophy-sized bucks.



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Whitetails are a wait-and-see situation

Overall, whitetail hunting should remain solid, but with some caveats. Whitetail harvests have grown over the last few decades and the last few years have been similar to the mule deer harvest.

"We've seen the whitetail harvest increase since the 1970s, and now it has plateaued over the last decade at a high level," Ward said.

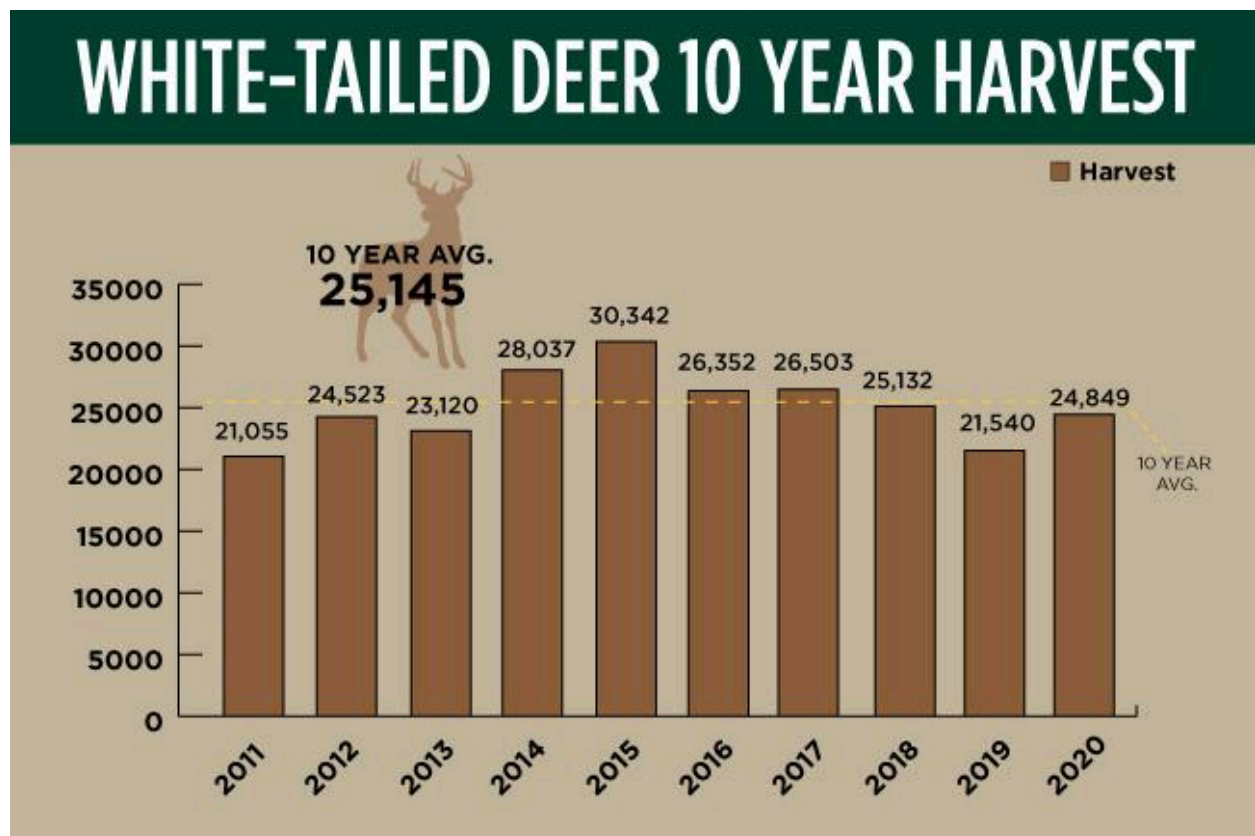


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Part of that growth is healthy whitetail populations, and part of it is hunters taking advantage of generous hunting seasons with lots of either-sex hunting opportunity. While harvest numbers are similar, whitetail hunting success rates were nearly two-thirds higher than mule deer hunting last year.

So far, there's no reason to think good whitetail hunting won't continue this fall, but biologists are closely watching a hemorrhagic disease outbreak that was detected in July and is likely to continue through late summer and fall. The disease tends to be highly contagious, but typically stays in fairly localized areas. If previous years are an indication, it may hit local herds hard in some areas, but won't have as severe of an impact on the statewide whitetail harvest.

However, that's not to downplay the impact of the disease, especially on those local whitetail herds. Fish and Game staff will continue to monitor the disease and update hunters throughout the hunting season.



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

Panhandle

Elk

Elk numbers in the Panhandle also remain strong with Units 1 and 4 being among the top elk units in the state, ranking fourth and third in 2019, and Panhandle units accounted for half of the top 10 elk units in the state with the Units 3, 6 and 5 joining Units 1 and 4.

With elk survival and production both ranging from moderate to high, hunters will have plenty of elk to pursue in the Panhandle Region in 2021 and should have a good-to-excellent hunting there.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Habitat conditions are very dry throughout north Idaho. There are numerous wildfires burning across the region that have led to large forest closures in certain areas both on federal lands and private timberlands. Some of these fires are expected to burn for a long time and conditions may not change for the better prior to archery seasons.

Hunters will want to check ahead and make sure they can access their hunting spots, and have a backup plan for where to go if closures still exist in their area. Please observe all restrictions in place regarding fires and off road travel.

Deer

Whitetail hunters should be able to see the usual healthy herds of whitetails. Fawn production and winter survival have been good the last few years, and the region has not had population setbacks in recent years. Unit 1 in the northern part of the region continues to be the top whitetail producer in the state, with good deer populations and ample public land access. But Unit 1 is not alone as a top producer in the Panhandle.

Units 2, 3, 5 and 6 were also in the top 10 for whitetails thanks to habitat and weather conditions that have been favorable for growing whitetails. Whitetail hunters in the Panhandle have a long hunting season, generous either-sex hunting opportunities and a good chance to encounter mature bucks.

Micah Ellstrom, Panhandle Regional Wildlife Manager

Clearwater Region

Due to uncertainty and constantly changing situations regarding a disease outbreak among the Clearwater's deer population, ongoing wildfires, and access closures, Fish and Game is postponing an outlook for the region. Hunters can stay up to date on what's happening through the [Clearwater Region webpage](#).

Southwest Region – Nampa

Elk

The Boise River Zone has seen consistently high calf and cow winter survival rates during the past three years. The population has remained stable to slightly increasing due to good winter calf and cow survival.

The elk harvest and harvest success rate in the Boise River Zone has also remained largely stable over that time period. The 2020 elk harvest came in at 917 animals harvested, with an 18 percent success rate. The Boise River Zone (Unit 39) has been the top unit in the state for elk harvest for three straight years and routinely competes with Units 50, 76 and 1 for the top spot.

Fish and Game conducted an aerial survey in the Boise River Elk Zone in late January and early February 2021. Results indicate cow elk numbers have increased since the last survey in 2015 and are slightly over population objectives as set by Fish and Game's elk management plan. The bull elk numbers are also within the range of objectives for the elk zone and, more importantly, is toward the top of the objectives.

The hunting outlook is also looking good in the Sawtooth Zone after a mild winter. The Sawtooth Elk Zone has averaged 634 elk harvested per year over the past 3 years. The 2020 hunting season resulted in a harvest of 658 elk, a 4 percent increase from the 3-year average. An aerial survey is planned for this winter in Sawtooth Elk Zone to estimate population size and status with respect to elk plan objectives. The zone was last surveyed during winter 2017. Biologists expect good numbers of elk available during the season in the Sawtooth Zone this fall, but weather conditions are likely to influence hunter success.

Mule Deer

With generous over-the-counter tags and any-weapon harvest seasons, and given its proximity to Idaho's most populated area, Unit 39 is the state's most popular and productive unit for mule deer hunters. Hunters harvested an estimated 3,025 mule deer in the unit in 2020—more than in any other unit in the state, and it wasn't particularly close. The next closest was neighboring Unit 43, where hunters harvested 1,180 mule deer.

More than two-thirds of the mule deer harvested in 2020 in the Nampa subregion were harvested in Unit 39. Unit 40 in the Owyhees is the next highest in terms of annual harvest at around one-fifth of the regional mule deer harvest, but general season opportunity is limited to two-points only.

Overall deer numbers have been increasing in Unit 39 for the last several years. When surveyed in January 2018, wintering deer in Unit 39 were up about 5,000 animals from the 2010 count. Adult winter survival has been consistently high.

Does have been radio-collared in the Owyhees as part of a research project over the last several years, and over-winter doe survival there was good last year.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

The one tip that is always pretty good in this part of the state is to get away from roads. If an area hosts a lot of people, the majority of deer and elk are not likely to be near the roads.

With the dry conditions throughout the summer, archery hunters in particular might benefit from focusing their attention around water sources or moist areas, particularly those in feeding areas that have green forage available for elk and deer.

Also along the lines of the current drought, Southwest Idaho has so far made it through the summer relatively unscathed in terms of fire. With that said, a lot can change quickly, so hunters should stay abreast of current fires and whether fires may affect their hunting unit. Fish and Game's [Fire Information webpage](#) is a good resource.

Wildlife managers are continuing to encourage antlerless harvest in 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 carrying capacity.

Fish and Game offered 2,000 either-sex deer tags (an increase of 500 tags from 2020) for Units 39 and 43 (Controlled Hunt No. 1068) in 2021 and hunters should not hesitate to harvest a doe.

Ryan Walrath, Regional Wildlife Manager

McCall subregion

Elk

Elk herds remain at or above objectives in most of the region with the exception of the Middle Fork Zone, which is still below objectives. Harvest success in the McCall zone is generally a little lower than in the more accessible units, but remains stable and should continue to produce good hunting.

Brownlee has an exceptionally high bull:cow ratio 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 objectives but harvest success recently started to drop off due to an intentional reduction of herds in order to meet population objectives. Several of these herds remain tough to access on private lands and continue to pose a challenge to landowners facing crop damage issues.

During season setting this year, some antlerless opportunity was reduced since the population is closer to objectives and Fish and Game reorganized a few of the private land hunts to try and push elk off private land.

Deer

A 2020 aerial survey shows the Weiser-McCall mule deer population has been slow to recover from the severe 2016-17 winter. However, thanks to milder winters, fawn survival has been around 71 percent the past two years, which is indicative of a growing population. Harvest has also been trending up in the same pattern, and this year should be no exception with higher numbers of yearling bucks.

During season setting this year, antlerless harvest opportunity was further reduced in attempt to help this population recover more quickly.

White-tailed deer herds are stable to slightly increasing across the region with the highest densities occurring in the northern portions. The whitetail season was extended in Unit 19A and either-sex opportunity was added in Unit 22 to be consistent with surrounding units.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

There were significant changes to the controlled Weiser bear hunts in GMUs 22, 31, 32, and 32A. Some of these changes included adding a general hunts within a mile of private land, as well as baiting and hound hunting opportunity. For a detailed description of the changes and new hunt structure, see the [black bear seasons webpage](#).

Nathan Borg, McCall Regional Wildlife Biologist

Magic Valley Region

Elk

For elk, the region is near or above objectives across the region, and wildlife managers are continuing to reduce overall elk numbers in some units by providing over-the-counter antlerless elk hunting. This action is primarily to alleviate elk damage to private property in the region.

Cow elk harvest is largely dictated by weather. Cool temperatures and early high-country snowstorms provided good hunting conditions last fall. With the current drought conditions and high temperatures, elk will be concentrated near good feed with reliable water sources and abundant thermal cover, especially early in the fall.

Mule Deer

The region is at objectives with most deer herds, and there was good fawn survival the last two winters. Mild winter conditions are favorable for fawn recruitment, and there will likely be a lot of yearlings in the deer herds this year.

The Magic Valley Region is experiencing extremely hot and dry spring and summer conditions, and animal distribution on the landscape can change from year to year. Hunters should expect to find deer concentrated in areas with good forage, reliable water, and abundant thermal cover, including spring seeps, wet meadows, and north facing slopes at higher elevations.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Hunters should check in with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management before they venture afield because access could be affected by wildfires. Hunters should also obtain current travel management maps, and be aware of off-road vehicle rules and restrictions in their preferred hunting area.

Sierra Robatcek, Regional Wildlife Biologist

Jake Powell, Regional Wildlife Biologist

Southeast Region

Elk

Hunters should expect good elk hunting this fall. Elk are simply more resilient to harsh environmental conditions than deer. As a result they are doing well across the region as evidenced by recent aerial surveys conducted the past few years. Biologists surveyed the Diamond Creek Zone in 2018 and the population estimate was dramatically higher than the previous survey in 2013, and the bull:cow:calf ratio indicates that it is still a stable to increasing population. The Bear River Elk Zone was last flown in 2017, and was up by about 40 percent from the last survey in 2010.

Deer

Deer hunting should be improved when compared to the past several years. Prior to this year, severe winter conditions have resulted in negligible changes to deer populations. However, this past mild winter resulted in above-average fawn survival for the eastern portion of the region and average survival in the western portion of the region. Additionally, overwinter adult survival was extremely high. As a result, hunters can expect more yearling bucks as well as some older age class bucks compared to recent years.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Weather conditions during the hunting season can sometimes affect big game behavior and distribution-- and thus, hunter success. Hot, dry weather can result in game concentrating near areas with water availability and cover at the highest or lowest elevations. Rainy conditions can result in more availability of quality native forage and natural water sources, which in turn can lead to big game being more widely dispersed on the landscape.

Many hunters have been concerned with drought conditions this summer. Despite these dry conditions, higher elevations and areas near water (e.g. streams at lower elevations) still provided adequate cover, water, and forage to sustain survival. Hunters should be cautious of wildfire risks in their activities and look for any fire related restrictions or closures prior to going hunting.

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 accessibility and conditions as well as make landowner contacts if they are planning to hunt on or near private property.

Zach Lockyer, Southeast Region Wildlife Manager

Upper Snake Region

Elk

By and large, the elk forecast is really good. All of the region's elk herds, except the Palisades Zone, are at or above management objectives. Wildlife managers recognize that the Palisades Elk Zone is one that performs on the lower end of our objectives compared with others, and part of that is by design. Changes were made to antlerless harvest opportunities in the Palisades Zone during this past season setting effort in order to address cow elk numbers that have been slightly below management objectives.

Elk hunters are in a good place with plenty of elk to chase, and one of things that is going to dictate the success of elk hunters is the weather. Much of the region has received significant amounts of rainfall at the end of July and the first part of August after an early hot summer. These rain events have coincided with cooling evening temperatures. These trends will hopefully continue and provide better hunting conditions.

Mule Deer

On a regional level, mule deer hunting is likely to be a little below average. Herds in the region are not back to where they were prior to the 2016-17 winter, when things were

really, really good. They're still trying to recover from that winter, along with a couple of other winters with elevated fawn mortality since then. Significant changes were made to antlerless deer hunting opportunity across the region in an attempt to try and assist in population recovery for struggling deer herds.

Fawn survival over this past winter was about average, and managers expect populations likely increased slightly, which is a good thing, and there should be a decent class of yearlings for hunters to pursue in the fall. The key to big changes in mule deer populations will be stringing a couple of mild winters together which leads to increased fawn survival. Winter severity remains the key driver of mule deer populations in the Upper Snake.

White-tailed deer

There's no reason to believe the whitetails are in a bad place, and whitetail hunting should be about normal, or average to what it has been over the last number of years. While whitetails aren't broadly distributed throughout the region, the higher density units for the region are in units 62, 62A, 63A, and 65.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

Managers are making some changes to the collection techniques and the locations where we Fish and Game is monitoring for Chronic Wasting Disease. Hunters should keep an eye out for head barrels or lymph node collection sites, where biologists are asking hunters to leave a head, or -- if they feel comfortable -- to leave us a lymph node sample. Monitoring for CWD is a priority for the department.

Managers also want to remind folks of reduced youth and other antlerless opportunity across the region, and as always; hunters need to review the regulations prior to going afield.

Curtis Hendricks, Upper Snake Region Wildlife Manager

Salmon Region

Elk

The elk populations in the region continue to hold steady, so folks should see good harvest opportunity again this season. Most of the elk zones are either at or above objectives. The Lemhi, Beaverhead, and Pioneer zones are above objectives outlined in the elk management plan for both cows and bulls. The Salmon zone remains within objectives and some reduction in antlerless opportunity has been initiated to protect the longevity of this hunting opportunity. The Middle Fork zones remains below objective for cows, but is meeting bull objectives.

The Salmon Region offers a wide range of general-season elk hunting with ample over-the-counter antlerless, or either-sex, opportunities and areas allowing the harvest of brow-tined bulls only. In addition we have a variety of controlled bull and cow hunts.

Mule Deer

Deer numbers are increasing, and wildlife managers are expecting to see a good general season this year. Fawn survival over this past winter was about even with the 10-year average, and biologists are now seeing that herds have absorbed the effects of the winter of 2016-17.

Once again, units 21 and 21A saw more snowfall and lower fawn survival than the rest of the Salmon Region. That may impact the upcoming bucks in those hunting units, but overall, the region's holding pretty strong. Severe drought conditions region wide may have a negative impact on buck antler size this year.

What hunters should be aware of this fall

With the newly established nonresident caps set on mule deer and elk general seasons the Salmon region expects to see a noticeable change in hunter numbers and distributions across most units. In addition nonresident hunters are now limited to a single deer unit and need to be diligent in knowing their unit boundaries. As hunter distributions change, managers want to encourage hunters to be courteous in the field.

Dennis Newman, Salmon Region Wildlife Manager

Hunters needed to help F&G get samples to test for Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic Wasting Disease is a contagious and fatal neurological disease that affects deer, elk, and moose is a threat to Idaho's big game animals. It has never been found in Idaho, and Fish and Game wants to prevent it from entering the state and ensure it has not developed in Idaho's big game herds. Hunters can help increase the number of Idaho deer, elk and moose sampled for CWD by doing one of the following:

- Collecting samples from harvested animal and dropping them off at identified Idaho Fish and Game collection locations or a [Regional Office](#).
- Dropping the head of harvested animal at identified Idaho Fish and Game collection locations or a Regional Office.
- Stop at one of Fish and Game's big game check stations during hunting season.
- All drop off locations and check station information will be available on the Fish and Game's CWD webpage: idfg.idaho.gov/cwd
- CWD sample kits can be requested directly from Fish and Game by emailing your mailing address to: wildlifelab@idfg.idaho.gov

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