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**FISH and
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DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in southcentral Washington. Game management units (GMU's) in District 8 include: 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtanum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali), and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrubsteppe and farmland, to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is best known for great elk hunting. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 8,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are about 4,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which mostly inhabits public land north of Ellensburg.

There are also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunities in District 8. Yakima County is near the top for harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove and chukar, #3 for pheasant, #4 for duck, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many options in District 8. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the highway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which utilizes a Hunt by Reservation system. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, and pheasant on the same day.

Turkeys were introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent turkey hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in Washington. While it is still challenging to draw a permit to hunt sheep, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip in District 8. Rams are in rut mid-October through November when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

Important Access Changes: Due to low elk populations and poor recruitment, early archery antlerless general seasons have largely been eliminated. GMU's 334 and 335 are still open to archery general season but hold few elk. GMU 371 (YTC) was added for 2021 to general archery spike bull and antlerless hunting.

The Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg recently went to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits via the Hunt by Reservation system.

The Master Hunter Antlerless elk season in GMU 371 now ends August 31. About 1,000 acres of land that had been open to Master Hunters in the 3911 Park Creek area has changed ownership

and is now closed to access. The new landowner will prosecute trespassers, so it is important to know where you are, and make sure you have permission to be on that property.

Hunters wanting to get a recreation card for accessing YTC should call 509-577-3208 to get current hours of the gym staff members. The gym has not been open on weekends. Procedures may also change with COVID-19 status. A Washington driver's license is still required to drive onto the post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification required.

2021 has seen severe drought with extreme fire danger. Land managers are restricting access. It has become common in recent years for areas to be closed due to fire. The U.S. Forest Service often has closures in place long after wildfires are extinguished. Before heading out, check land manager websites for any closures or restrictions.

Grouse season does not start until September 15. Chukar season has been extended to January 31.

ELK



District 8 used to be one of the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction came relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are

looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader.

The only antlerless archery general seasons are now in GMU's 334, 335, and 371. GMU's 334 and 335 are managed for minimal numbers of elk due to adjacent agriculture. Elk Area 3911 covers all of GMU 334 and the lower portions of GMU 335 where most elk in these units reside. Master Hunters are allowed to harvest antlerless elk using modern firearms from August 1 – January 20 in 3911, so any archery hunters hunting in Elk Area 3911 should be aware they are required to wear hunter orange. In 2020, archers harvested 14 antlerless elk from GMU 335 and no elk in GMU 334. GMU 371 is open terrain but has good numbers of elk. Access to GMU 371 changes with military training.

The reason for the changes is that both the Yakima and Colockum elk herds are below management objectives due to poor recruitment. Surveys this past winter found the Colockum herd numbered around 4,100. Prior to the winter of 2015-16, the Colockum herd was over 6,000 elk during March surveys. The Yakima herd was not surveyed this past year, but calf recruitment was 27 calves per 100 cows on WDFW elk winter feeding areas. That is an improvement over the record low 19 seen in February 2020, but below what is needed to increase herd numbers.

Modern firearm and muzzleloader elk hunting general season success in this district strongly correlates with the number of calves seen in late winter the previous year, as those are the spikes available for harvest in fall. There should be improved harvest in 2021 over 2020, but still below average (Figure 1, Table 1). The lack of recruitment is also impacting both branched bull and antlerless permitting. Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October, whereas Figure 3 is from a recent study on Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads once seasons begin. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide some of the better opportunities in the District for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country away from roads.

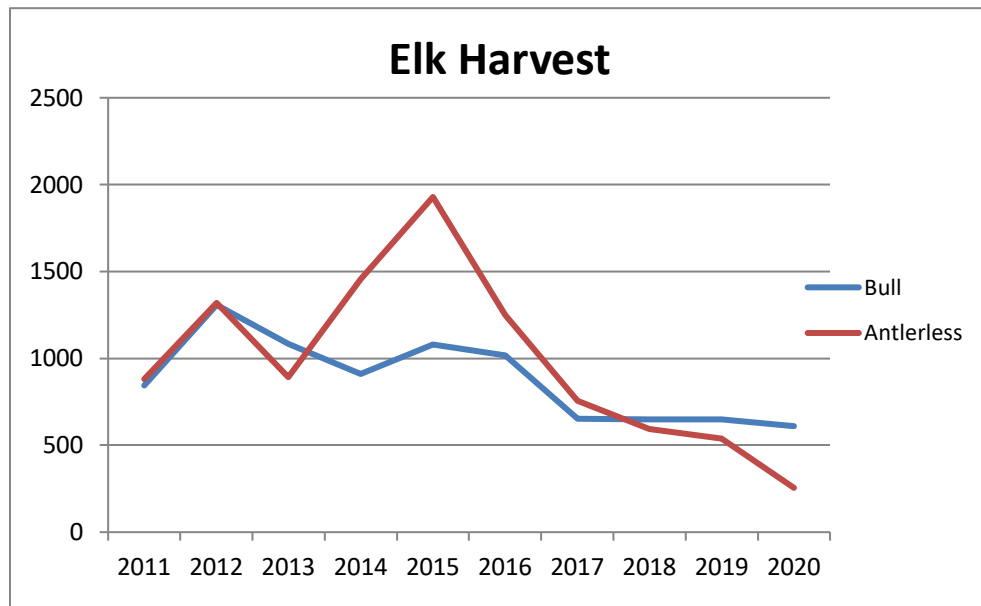


Figure 1. District 8 Elk Harvest

| GMU | Antlerless | Spike | Total | Hunters | Success |
|--------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| 328 | 84 | 82 | 165 | 3088 | 5% |
| 329 | 24 | 64 | 88 | 1563 | 6% |
| 334 | 10 | 2 | 11 | 318 | 4% |
| 335 | 18 | 9 | 27 | 823 | 3% |
| 336 | 11 | 23 | 34 | 1054 | 3% |
| 340 | 7 | 49 | 56 | 1995 | 3% |
| 342 | 12 | 31 | 43 | 1324 | 3% |
| 346 | 5 | 50 | 55 | 1513 | 4% |
| 352 | 30 | 18 | 48 | 1330 | 4% |
| 356 | 14 | 31 | 46 | 1105 | 4% |
| 360 | 0 | 37 | 37 | 1290 | 3% |
| 364 | 13 | 24 | 37 | 1001 | 4% |
| 368 | 28 | 80 | 108 | 1692 | 6% |
| Total | 258 | 499 | 757 | 18094 | 4% |

Table 1. Elk General Season Average 2018-20

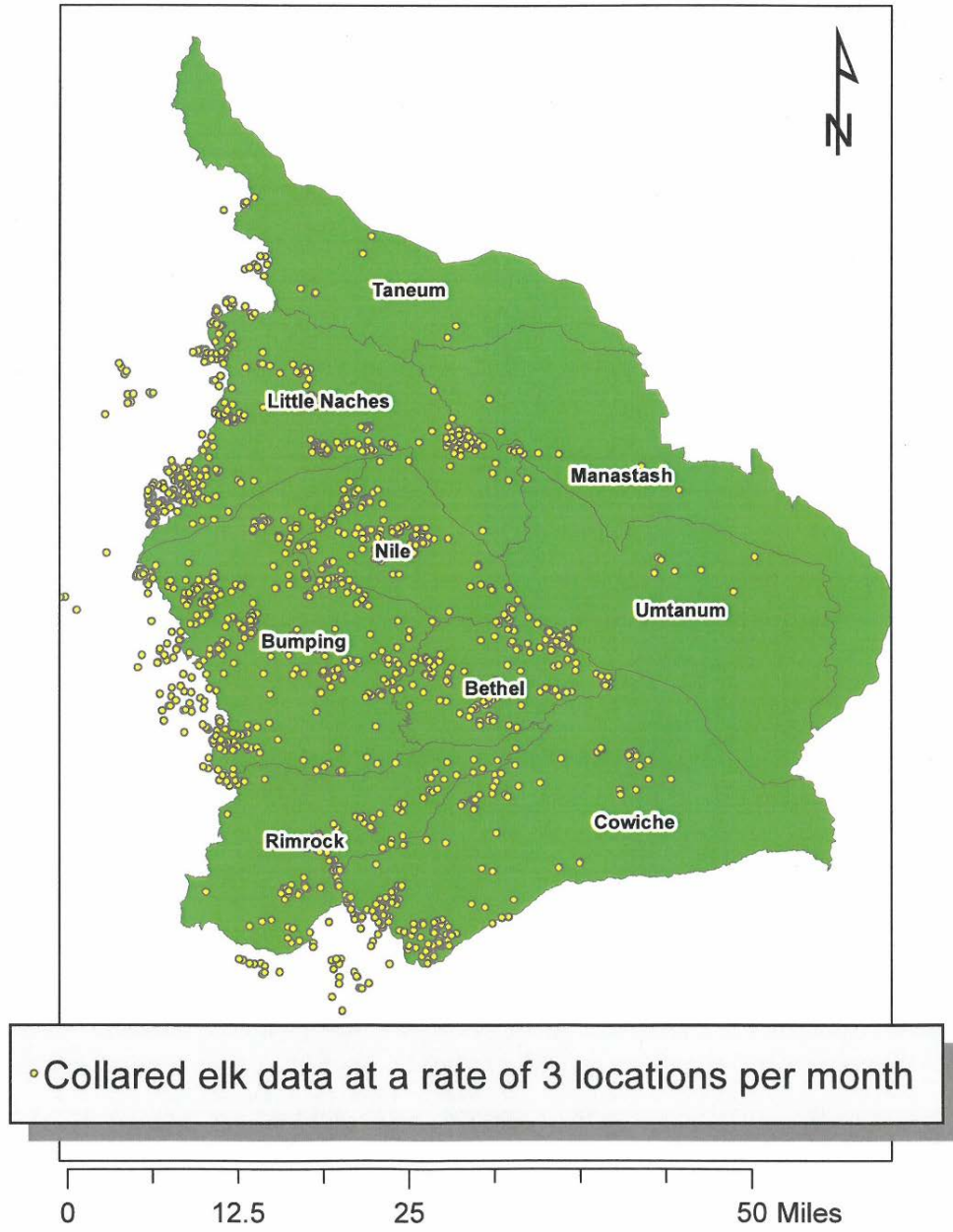


Figure 2. A sample of Yakima Elk Herd's Fall Distribution from 140 collared females during Sept. and Oct. 2004-2006

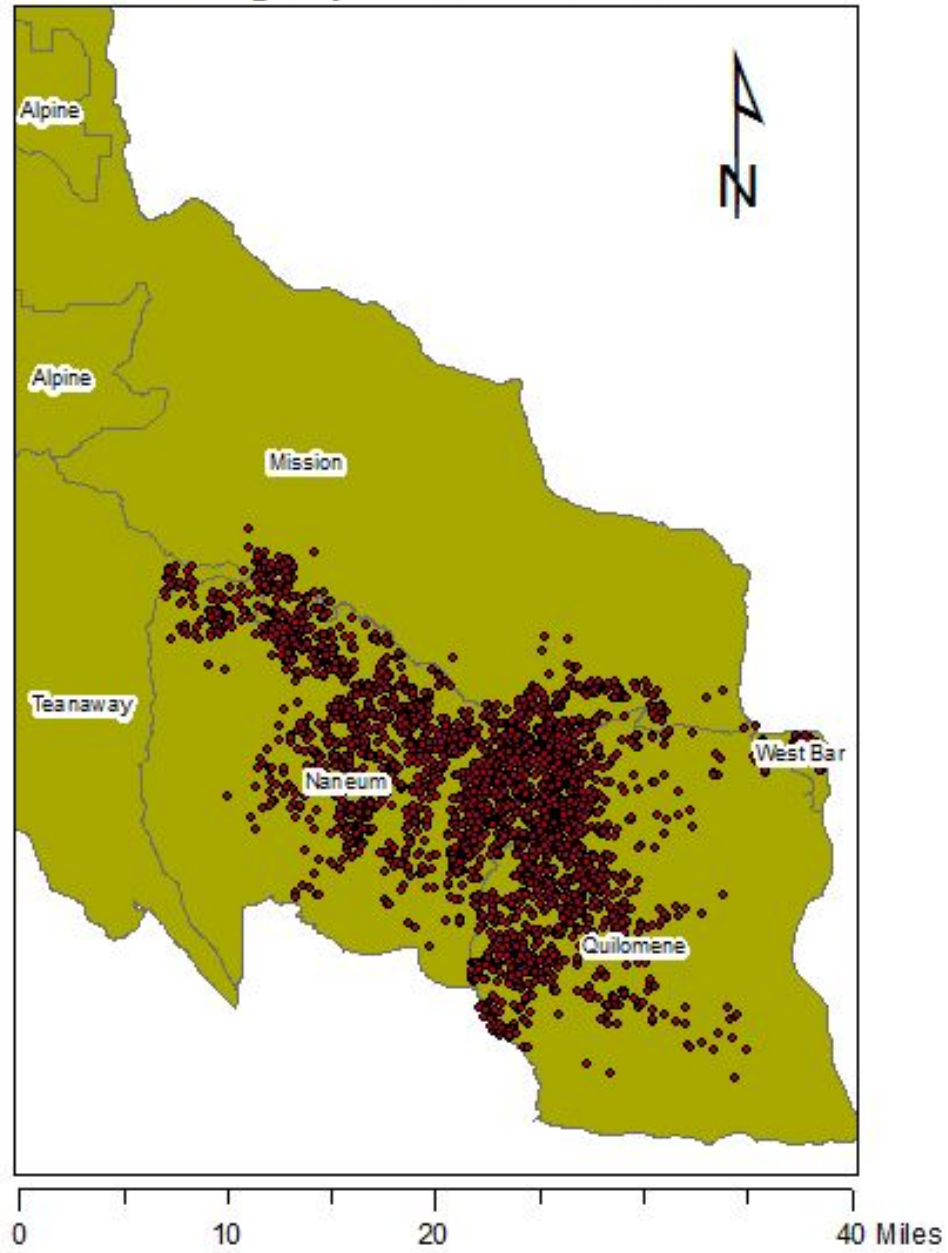


Figure 3. Colockum Elk Herd, collared female locations during September and October

DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 hit its lowest levels in 2017-2018 and has since rebounded slightly (Figure 4). The average general season hunter's success is about 7% compared to a statewide average of 23%. The 2021 harvest is hard to predict. Last winter was mild, but spring population surveys indicated the deer population may have still declined. A new deer study was started north of I-90 and close to 35% of adult females have died. Such a high mortality rate will cause any deer population to decline. Spring/summer 2021 has been an extreme drought. Harvest and hunter numbers by GMU for the last three years are shown in Table 2.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters now set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMU's 335 (Teaway), 328 (Naneum), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

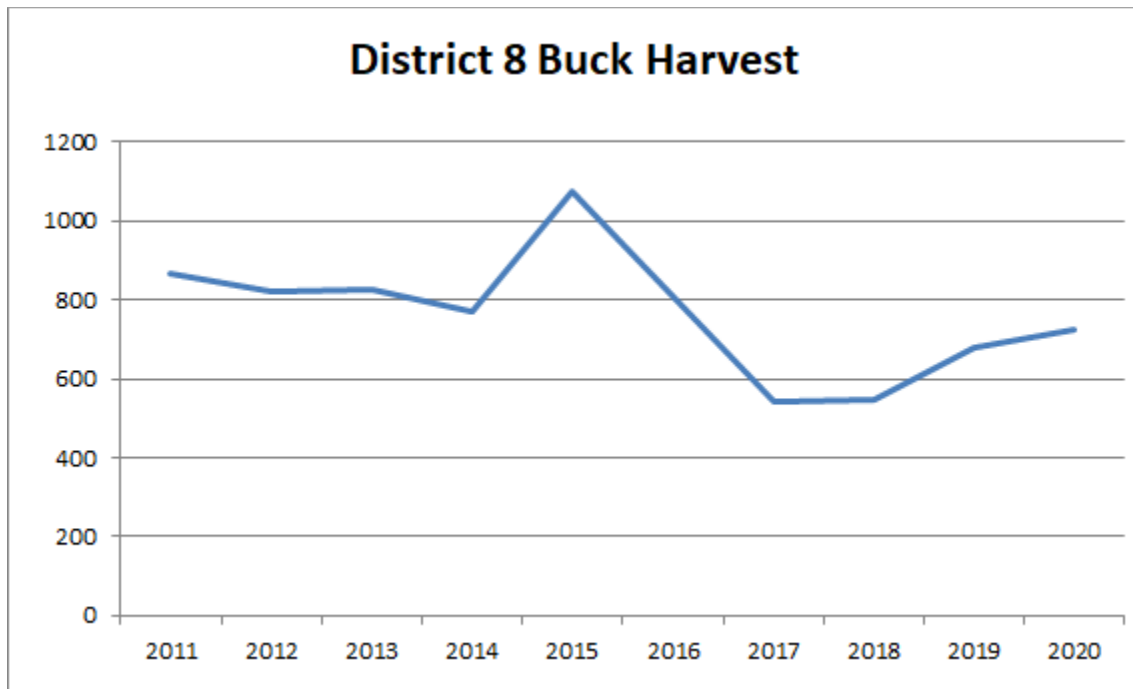


Figure 4. District 8 buck harvest

| GMU | Buck Harvest | Hunters | Success |
|-------|--------------|---------|---------|
| 328 | 111 | 1311 | 8% |
| 330 | 3 | 16 | 19% |
| 334 | 22 | 288 | 8% |
| 335 | 168 | 1504 | 11% |
| 336 | 40 | 730 | 5% |
| 340 | 83 | 1161 | 7% |
| 342 | 77 | 936 | 8% |
| 346 | 16 | 664 | 2% |
| 352 | 20 | 479 | 4% |
| 356 | 6 | 296 | 2% |
| 360 | 9 | 407 | 2% |
| 364 | 7 | 371 | 2% |
| 368 | 51 | 1059 | 5% |
| Total | 613 | 9224 | 7% |

Table 2. District 8 General Season Deer Average 2018-20

COUGAR

The majority of cougars in the district are harvested by deer and elk hunters who opportunistically cross paths with a cat during general deer/elk seasons and have a cougar tag in their pocket. However, more hunters are finding that cougar hunting is a fun and challenging experience. The early season is open September 1 – December 31. The late season starts January 1 and continues until harvest guidelines are reached (seasons close April 1). Male cougars are territorial and use a broader range when deer and elk are dispersed in summer and early fall. Deer and elk typically migrate back to the winter range by mid-November. Cougars will follow, and the highest cat densities can be found during late fall and winter in lower elevations. One popular cougar hunting technique is to use calls. This is most successful when there is snow on the ground and tracks can be found. Rather than following the cougar hoping to “run it down”, hunters call, trying to get the cat to come to them. A number of calls work. During deer and elk seasons, hunters might consider a fawn bleat call, which typically won’t spook deer or elk. Without snow, it can be difficult to know where to start. Rather than working large blocks of timber, consider timbered stringers. Cougars inhabit open terrain but prefer cover. Cats hunting open shrubsteppe will likely be hiding in timber stringers during the day. Cougars inhabit nearly every portion of the district, but some online hunting groups post where cats have been seen recently. Checking those sites may improve your success.

WATERFOWL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) did not fly breeding population surveys in 2020 or 2021. Previous estimates had been above the long-term average, but declining. Ducks need water and the extreme drought throughout the west and prairie potholes is likely to negatively impact flyway populations. Banding attempts and harvest in District 8 have shown declining populations. Harvest peaked around 50,000 birds in 2012 and declined to 20,000 in 2020 (Figure 5). For local hunters, local weather conditions and available food is important for getting and keeping northern migrants in the valley. As row crops like corn are converted to hops, orchard, and vineyard, duck numbers in the district are expected to keep declining in the short-term.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley, especially on Yakama Nation (YN) lands. The Yakama Nation is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their [Feel Free to Hunt map](#) annually, use Google Earth to pre-scout, and don’t be afraid to explore. YN’s Satus Wildlife Area is the most popular and is open to hunting Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday, and holidays. The main Satus Wildlife Area is very popular due to relatively easy access. Hunting can be just as good on Mosebar ponds and north Satus.

Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). The Sunnyside Wildlife Area has continued to manage challenges with dense vegetation and low water in recent years. Harvest and hunters’ days on Sunnyside have been fairly low.

Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge has also had difficulty filling wetlands, especially in October. Water cannot be pumped from Toppenish to fill wetlands in the Robins Unit unless flows are greater than 30 cubic feet per second. The Pumphouse wetlands are dependent on Toppenish Creek side channels to fill at higher creek levels. Flows in those side channels have

been a bit unpredictable in recent years. It appears that at a gauge height of 3 feet, the channels should fill. Hunters can check flow/levels at the [USGS website](#). Summer 2021 has been dry and creek flows are low. If significant rain does not fall, don't expect water in the refuge until sometime in November. Before making a trip to Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. This past spring was very dry. Casual observations suggest the hatch was likely below average.

Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best late-season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

[An excellent introduction on waterfowl hunting in Washington can be found on the WDFW Let's go waterfowl hunting webpage.](#)

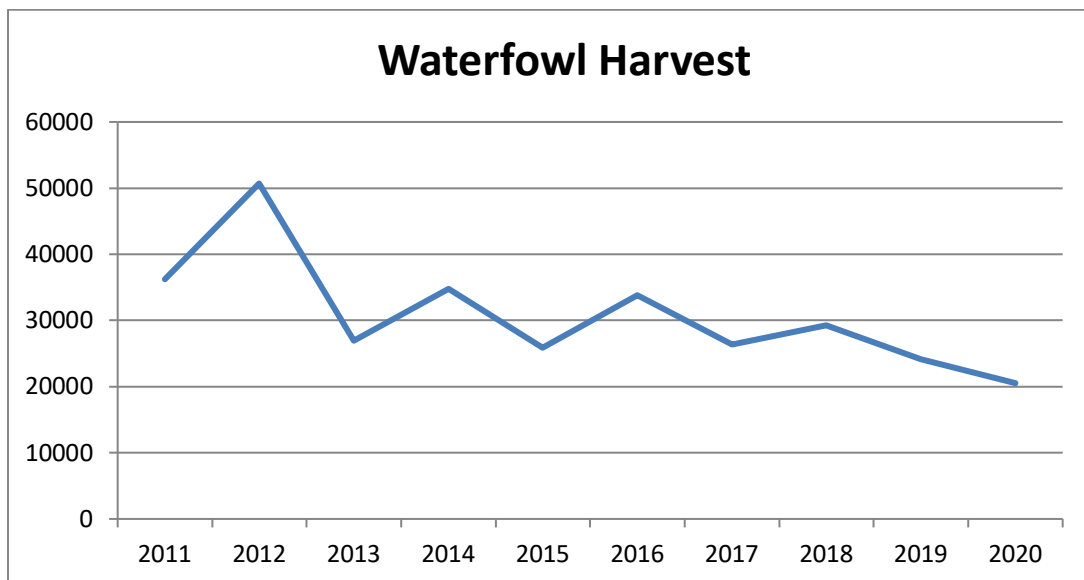


Figure 5. District 8 Waterfowl Harvest

DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. Harvest numbers have generally been declining for the past 10 years (Figure 6). Banding indicated poor recruitment over the past 10 years until 2020 when hatch-year birds increased. To date, 2021 appears to be one of the best recruitment years in recent time.

The best hunting success in the lower Yakima Valley is on private land. The better public hunting can be found on the Yakama Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on

portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. Information on hunting on Yakama Nation land is available on their [website](#).

The Sunnyside Wildlife Area has public dove hunting, but registration boxes suggest relatively poor harvest the last three years. Hunters typically average <1 bird per day. Attempts were made to improve hunting in 2017 by mowing weeds and unsuccessful food plots. As soon as doves concentrated, raptors arrived and dispersed the doves. Large dove concentrations quickly dispersing has been seen frequently while banding. This suggests hunters should locate numerous fields and scout only a day or two before the season.

Dove numbers in the area often depend on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunities, as the season extends year-round, without bag limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically, but there was a die-off in 2018-2019, probably due to Avian Paramyxovirus-1. The virus was widespread nationwide in Eurasian collared doves, and populations have not rebounded. No information is collected on collared dove harvest nor are there surveys. The difficulty for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to behave more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find opportunities at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

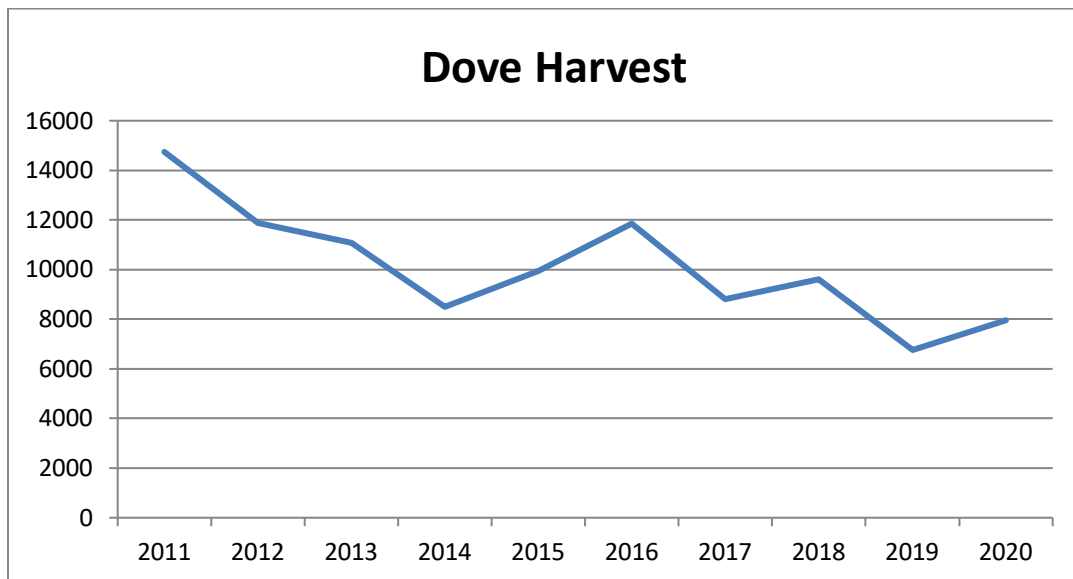


Figure 6. District 8 Dove Harvest

FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 has been variable over the last 10 years (Figure 7), varying between 3,200 and 5,700 birds. No data are available on the 2021 hatch. There has been an extreme drought in the valleys in 2021, but snowpack has kept moisture in the mountains much longer.

The majority of harvest in District 8 is on blue grouse. Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

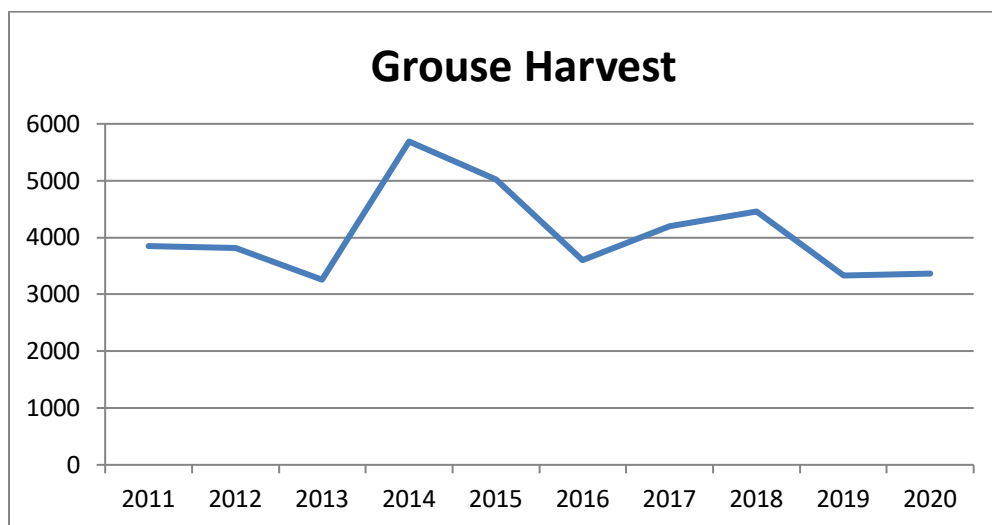


Figure 7. District 8 Grouse Harvest

PHEASANT

Pheasant harvest in District 8 has declined about 50% over the last ten years and recently leveled out at very low levels (Figure 8). The only place to find huntable numbers of wild birds is on the Yakama Nation Reservation (YN). Pheasant numbers have been declining for decades on YN due to conversion from fallow land to crops. There has been no recent change in this trend. Even if grain prices declined, farmers would switch to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle. A compounding negative factor is the conversion to hops and orchard.

Wild pheasant in District 8 typically have better hatches with high moisture. The year 2020 was one on the driest in history in the Yakima Valley and the drought has worsened in 2021. Irrigation water can make up for dry conditions where it seeps into weed patches, but those areas are becoming rare. Wild pheasant contribute little to the total harvest in the district and have likely declined further the last few years.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. The Yakama Nation has historically conducted production surveys, but they did not post 2019 results or do surveys in 2020. It is unknown if surveys were completed in 2021. Information on surveys and hunting on the Yakama Nation Reservation is available on their [website](#).

Released pen-raised pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 1,700 roosters will be released in District 8 in 2021. The Cottonwoods site on the Wenas Wildlife Area burned in 2020 and will not be used in 2021. The birds have been reallocated to Sunnyside (1200) and Whiskey Dick (500).

For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside. Historically, turnout in September had been low, and kids have had a difficult time finding released birds. In the last few years, WDFW switched to mentored hunts and releasing birds when kids arrive on Saturday morning. Volunteers from the local chapter of Pheasants Forever run the events. During school breaks, there have been clinics for first-time hunters. Due to evolving COVID-19 restrictions, it is unknown if the clinics will take place this year.

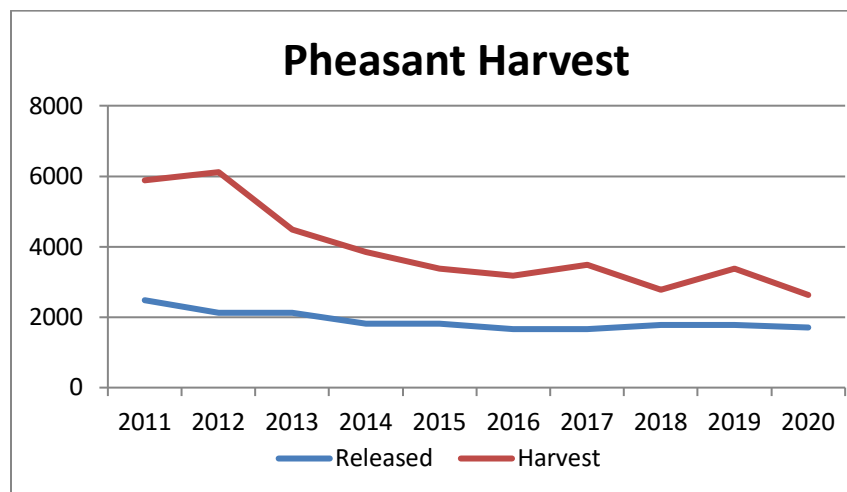


Figure 8. District 8 Pheasant Harvest

QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail are typically in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County led the state in quail harvest with an average of 15,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 1,900.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest the last 10 years (Figure 9). A variety of factors from deep snow, drought, and fires have reduced quail populations. Quail in riparian draws surrounded by sagebrush are getting hard to find. Most of the quail habitat on the Wenas Wildlife Area has burned in recent years and the drought will not be good for quail in drier habitats. The best chance of finding good coveys will be near rivers and artificial water sources.

WDFW manages various parcels along the lower Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunities. Information on surveys and hunting on Yakama Nation land [is available on their website](#).

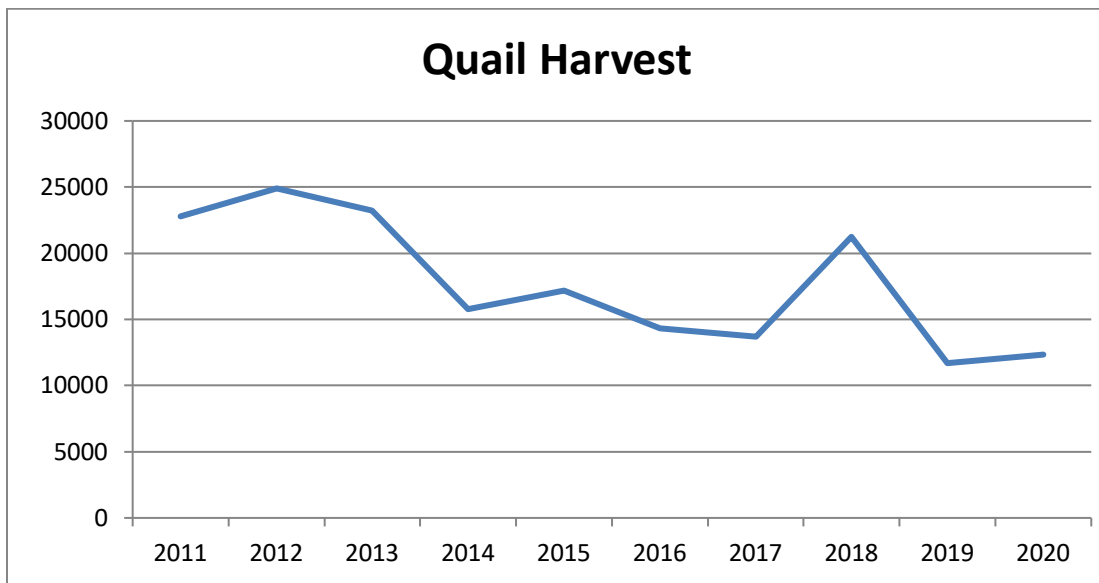


Figure 9. District 8 Quail Harvest

TURKEY



Turkey populations peaked in 2010 following releases in the late 1990s and appear to have settled at lower levels (Figure 10). The majority of the District 8 harvest comes from GMU 335 (Table 3). The best hunting early in the spring is on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teanaway Community Forest. The remainder of GMU's produce <25 bird harvest.

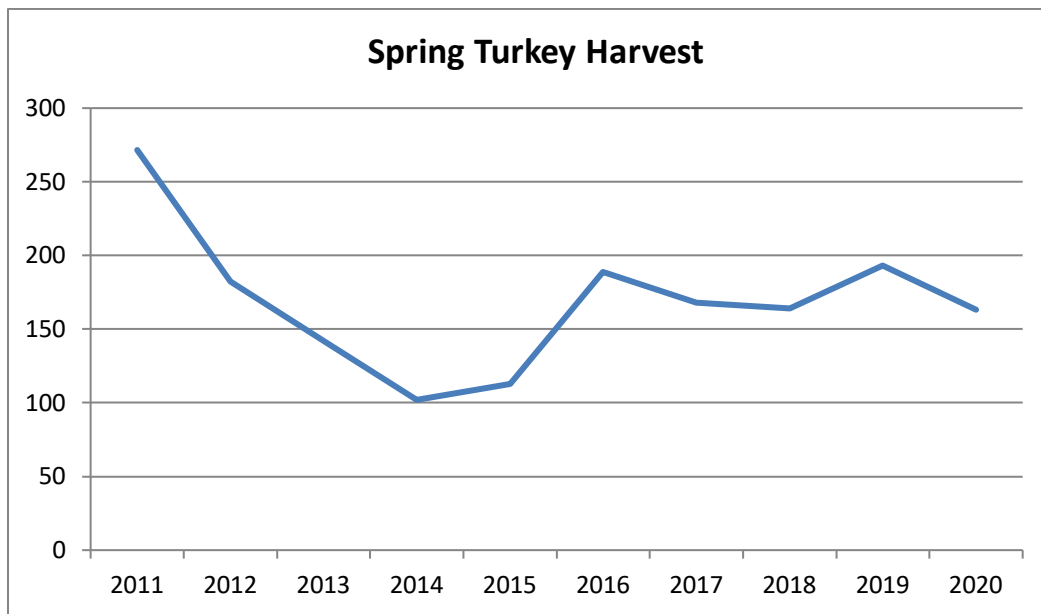


Figure 10. District 8 Spring Turkey Harvest

| GMU | GMU Name | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Average |
|-------|---------------|------|------|------|---------|
| 328 | NANEUM | 29 | 25 | 17 | 24 |
| 329 | QUILOMENE | 21 | 16 | 11 | 16 |
| 334 | ELLENSBURG | 13 | 17 | 14 | 15 |
| 335 | TEANAWAY | 57 | 70 | 59 | 62 |
| 336 | TANEUM | 14 | 20 | 26 | 20 |
| 340 | MANASTASH | 6 | 16 | 9 | 10 |
| 342 | UMTANUM | 18 | 16 | 18 | 17 |
| 346 | LITTLE NACHES | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 352 | NILE | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| 356 | BUMPING | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| 360 | BETHEL | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| 364 | RIMROCK | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 368 | COWICHE | 5 | 10 | 4 | 6 |
| 372 | RATTLESNAKE | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | | 167 | 195 | 165 | 173 |

Table 3. District 8 Spring Turkey Harvest by GMU

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been decreasing since 2018 (Figure 11). History has shown that abundant snow and a wet, cold spring produces a lot of vegetation and birds. There are few three-year-old game birds, so the population is composed primarily of hatch-year birds. Even when it seems most birds died in the winter, they rebound very quickly as melting snow improves soil moisture.

Precipitation has been minimal the last few years. 2020 was one of the driest years in history and 2021 is even drier. The hatch is not expected to be very good this year. The best hunting in recent years has been near wet draws on the Quilomene and Colockum Wildlife areas. Look for areas near large patches of good riparian vegetation.

The Yakima Training Center (YTC) is very popular with long-time chukar hunters. Much of YTC has burned in the last decade and 2021 is an extreme drought year for the area. Flights for elk over the installation found very small coveys in 2021. Note the recreation card information in the “Overview” portion of this document.

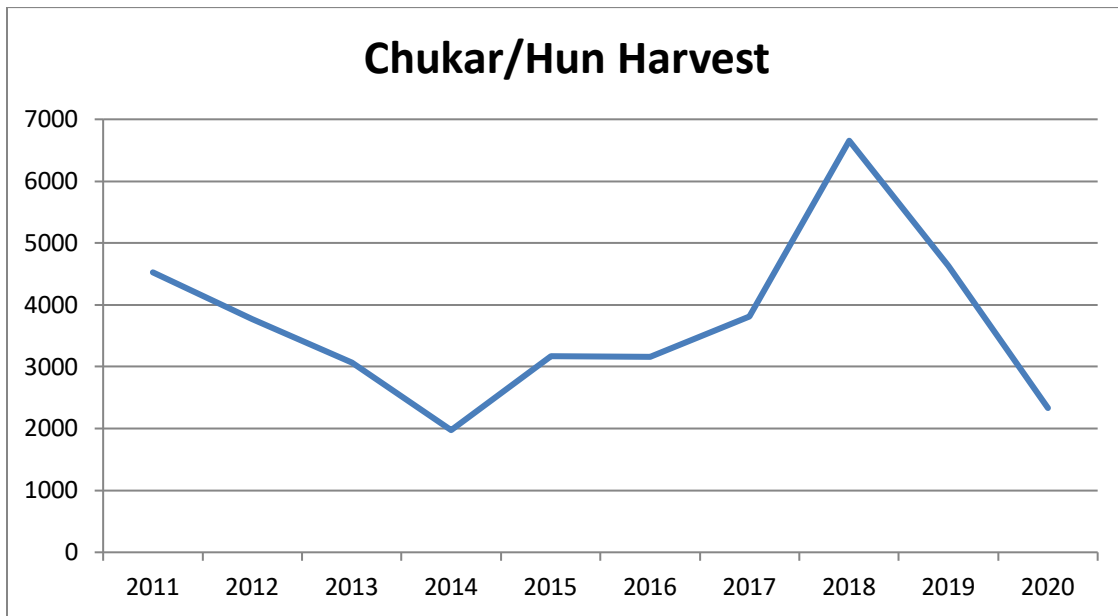


Figure 11. District 8 Chukar and Hun Harvest