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Washington  
Department of  
**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**



## **DISTRICT 4 HUNTING PROSPECTS**

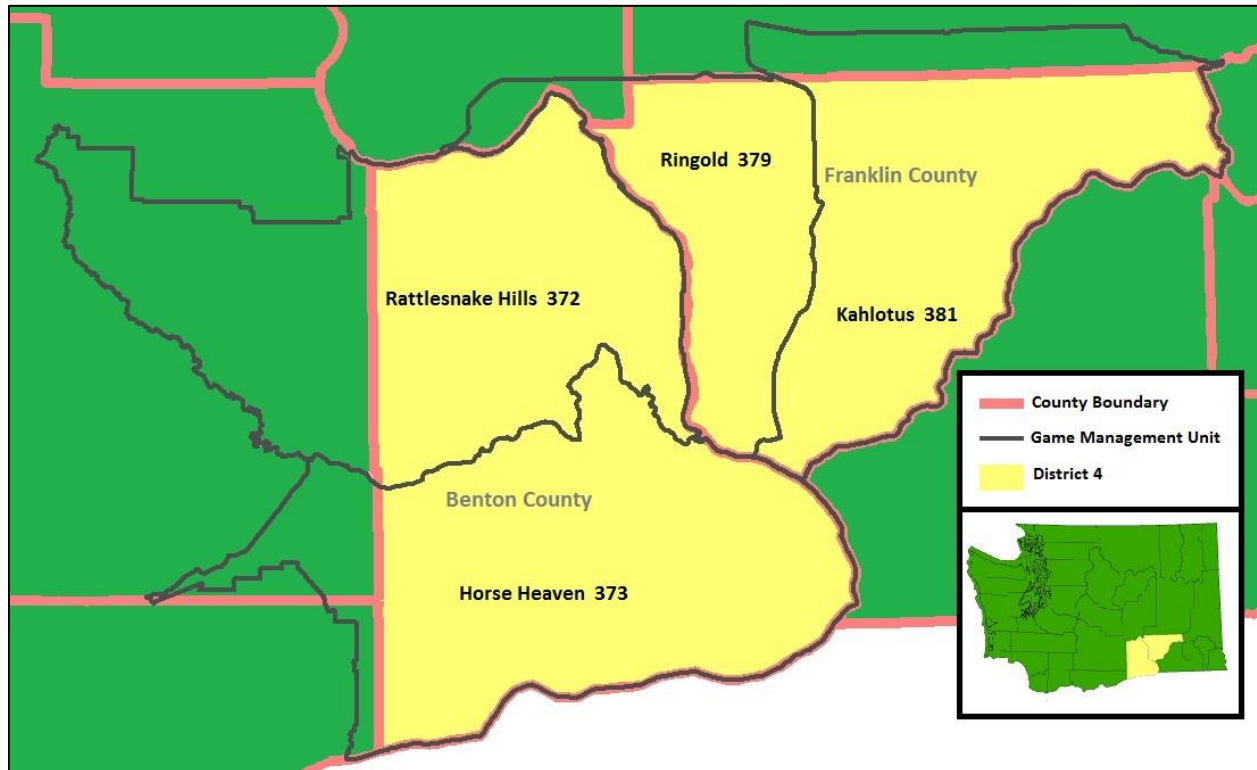
Benton and Franklin counties

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## DISTRICT 4 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 4 is located in the Columbia Basin in the southcentral part of Washington (Figure 1). The district is comprised of Benton and Franklin counties and administratively is part of WDFW's Southcentral Region 3. The following game management units (GMUs) are included in District 4: 372 (Rattlesnake Hills), 373 (Horse Heaven), 379 (Ringold), and 381 (Kahlotus).



**Figure 1.** Location of District 4 in Washington and associated counties and game management units.

Several of Washington's major rivers occur in District 4. The Hanford Reach of the Columbia River runs between Benton and Franklin counties. This 50-mile stretch is one of the most scenic segments of the Columbia in Washington. The Snake and Palouse rivers delineate the eastern boundary of Franklin County. In District 4, you'll find the confluence of the Yakima, Snake, and Walla Walla rivers with the main stem of the Columbia River near Tri-Cities (Pasco, Kennewick, and Richland). Large populations of waterfowl congregate throughout the district for breeding, migrating, and wintering, even though this is the driest part of Washington with only 6-9 inches of precipitation annually. While a mostly treeless landscape, riparian and shrub-steppe vegetation provides habitat and cover for game birds, and the breaks along the Snake and Palouse rivers are favored by wintering mule deer. The Rattlesnake Hills elk population is centered on the access-restricted Hanford Site and Hanford Reach National Monument, though lucky hunters may find small groups scattered across the district.

Upland habitats are part of the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion, historically dominated by native shrubsteppe. Intensive irrigated agriculture—supporting many crops, orchards, and vineyards—

is a major land use in the Yakima River Valley, southern Benton County, and western Franklin County. Dryland wheat is dominant in central Benton County and eastern Franklin County. Many thousands of acres of this wheat country have been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Program (SAFE), providing cover for mule deer and other wildlife that have lost much of their natural shrubsteppe habitat. Fires are currently the largest threat to the remaining habitat and are frequently human caused. Invasive cheatgrass has created a flammable carpet throughout the shrubsteppe, often facilitating large and fast-moving fires. Sagebrush takes decades to return post-fire, so please be careful and fire-wise.

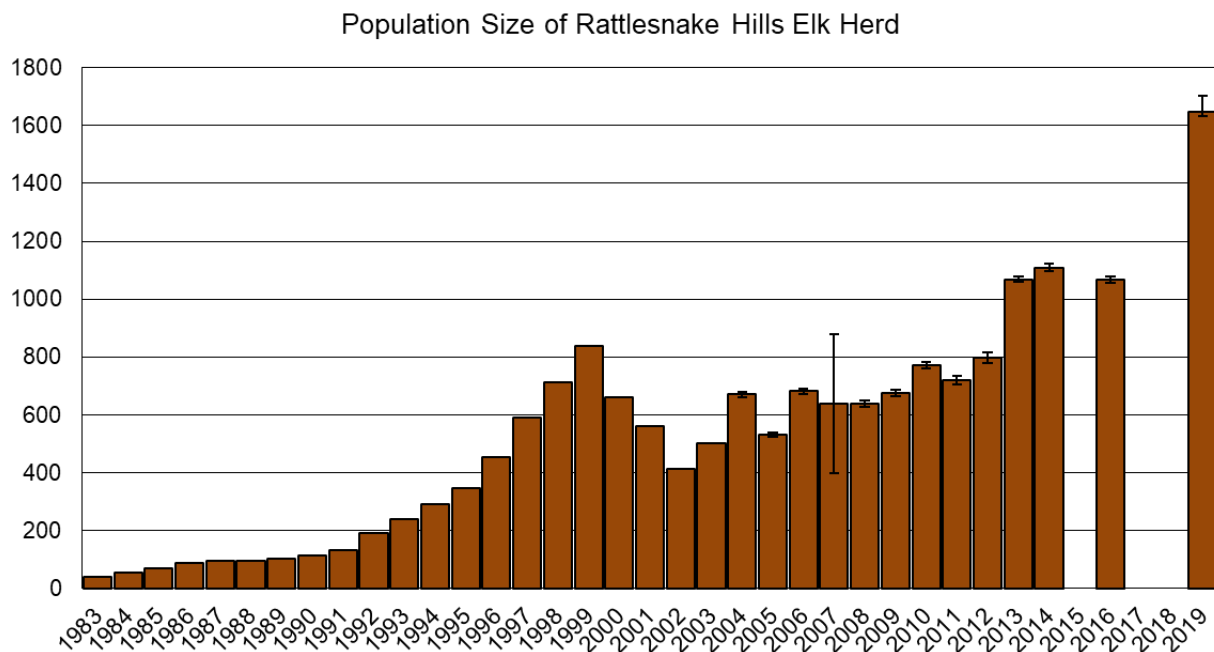
In Benton County, large east-west trending ridges, including the Horse Heaven Hills and Rattlesnake Hills, add to the topographic diversity of the district. The eastern Franklin County landscape includes the rolling hills of the Palouse Prairie and the southernmost extent of the channeled scablands. Western Franklin County contains several small lakes and depression wetlands that provide additional wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

Hunting access in District 4 is more limited than in some other parts of the state, as much of the district is in private ownership or on federal properties closed to hunting. However, quality opportunities do exist, and WDFW is always trying to expand hunting access. Information and related links to several public sites listed in each game section can be found in the Major Public Lands section. Information on how to access private land through one of WDFW's access programs is available in the Hunting on Private Lands section on the [WDFW website](#).

Overall, the landscape of District 4 provides a diversity of habitats favored by waterfowl, upland birds (including chukar, partridge, pheasant, quail, and dove), and big game (including deer and elk). Welcome to District 4 and happy hunting!

## ELK

Opportunities for elk hunting in District 4 occur on lands surrounding the Hanford Reach National Monument in Rattlesnake Hills GMU 372, which contains Blackrock Elk Area 3722 and Corral Canyon Elk Area 3721. There are also parts of the Ringold 379 and Kahlotus 381 GMUs where in recent years, herds of ~100 elk have resided. Surveys on the Hanford Monument in January 2019 yielded a total herd estimate of 1,646 elk (Figure 2). This herd is well above the management objective of 350, but harvest remains challenging as the herd often seeks refuge on closed federal Hanford lands in daylight hours during hunting season.



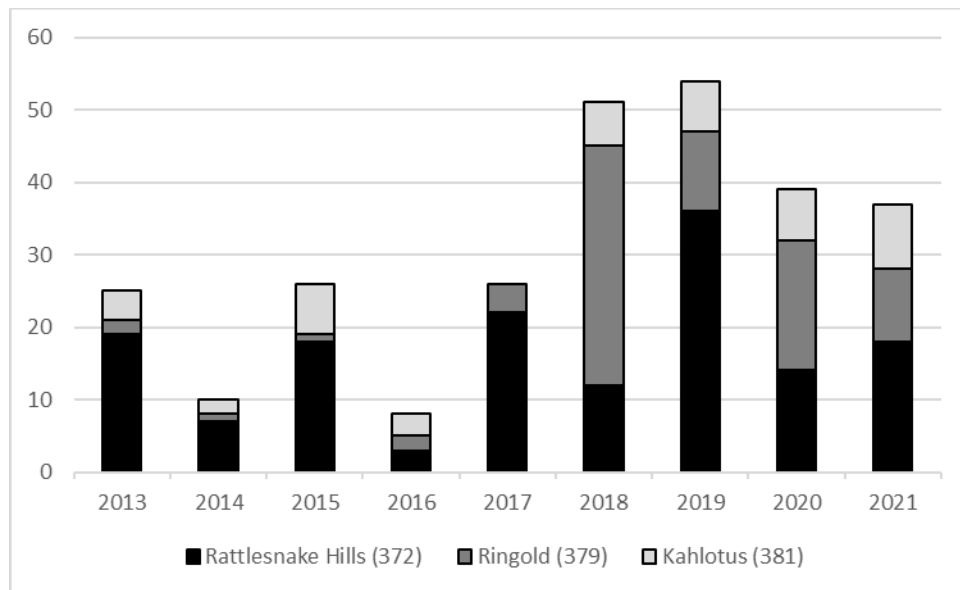
**Figure 2.** Winter population estimates of Hanford elk herd over time.

While most of the land around the Hanford Monument is private, hunters can pursue elk in Benton County on WDFW’s Thornton and Rattlesnake Slope units of the Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area during Modern Firearm season. There is a high demand for access in this area so coordinate access well ahead of time to improve success. One way to gain access to private lands here is through the Blackrock Ranches and Silver Dollar special permit hunts. These offer a chance to hunt Hanford elk on private land. If selected, permit holders are typically issued a one-day “guided” hunt. There are permits for youth and hunters with disabilities, plus Quality Elk and Antlerless Permits open to any hunter. See the current [hunting regulations](#) for more information.

Increasing numbers of hunters have had success in the Ringold 379 GMU where there are both early and late Archery and Muzzleloader seasons for elk in addition to Modern Rifle seasons. The numbers of elk here are small, but the Windmill Ranch and Bailie Units of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area might be your best bet. Each of these hunting areas has 2 designated parking

areas where hunters are required to park and register, and each allows a maximum of 8 vehicles per lot. Occasionally the Ringold Unit of the [Hanford Reach Monument](#) (shotgun, muzzleloader, and archery see [USFWS Regulations](#)), and rarely the Juniper Dune Wilderness, have elk during hunting seasons. In Kahlotus 381 GMU, small groups roam between Kahlotus and the Palouse River, but they are rarely encountered off private land.

During general hunting seasons, 200-300 hunters report that they pursue elk in District 4. Of which 25-55 are usually successful (Figure 3). You can see online [Harvest Reports](#) for any species, weapon, or hunt over past years. Harvest success usually depends upon private land access, forage conditions on the Hanford Site, and the availability of forage crops outside of the restricted area. Hunters are usually more successful early in the season.



**Figure 3.** General Season elk harvest in District 4 by GMU over time.





**Image 1.** Youth hunter with elk harvested in GMU 372.

### **ELK HOOF DISEASE (TREPONEME BACTERIA)**

Elk Hoof Disease is currently not known to occur in elk from District 4; the affliction is concentrated in southwest Washington, but it occurs rarely in other herds around the state. WDFW diagnostic research, in conjunction with a panel of scientific advisors, found that the reported hoof abnormalities were strongly associated with treponeme bacteria, known to cause a hoof disease of cattle, sheep, and goats called digital dermatitis. Although digital dermatitis has affected the livestock industry for decades, Treponeme-Associated Hoof Disease (TAHD) is the first known instance of digital dermatitis in a wild ungulate. While many questions remain about the disease, several aspects of TAHD in elk are clear:

- **Vulnerability:** The disease appears to be highly infectious among elk, but there is no evidence that it affects humans. TAHD can affect any hoof in any elk, young or old, male or female.
- **Hooves only:** Tests show the disease is limited to animals' hooves and does not affect their meat or organs. If the meat looks normal and if hunters harvest process, cooking practicing, and good hygiene, the meat is probably safe to eat.
- **No treatment:** There is no vaccine to prevent the disease, nor are there any proven options for treating it in the field. Similar diseases in livestock are treated by cleaning

and bandaging their hooves and giving them foot baths, but that is not a realistic option for free-ranging elk.

#### **How hunters can help:**

- **Report elk:** Hunters can help WDFW track TAHD by reporting observations of both affected and unaffected elk on the department's online reporting form (link below). If you harvest an elk with abnormal looking hooves in eastern Washington (for example, overgrown or broken hoof claws or skin lesions), please report that harvest to your local WDFW regional office.
- **Clean shoes and tires:** Anyone who hikes or drives off-road in a known affected area can help minimize the risk of spreading the disease to new areas by removing all mud from their shoes and tires before leaving the area.

WDFW is working with scientists, veterinarians, outdoor organizations, tribal governments and others to better understand and manage TAHD. There's more information about [TAHD and the online reporting tool](#).



## DEER

District 4 primarily offers mule deer hunting opportunities. White-tailed deer are relatively uncommon in the district, making up less than one percent of deer on surveys, but white-tail seasons exist to allow hunters to legally harvest white-tailed deer if encountered. In 2021, the hunter success rate during the general seasons for deer across all weapons in the District was 25%, with a five-year average of 27% success. Statewide average deer hunter success was 24% (all species). District 4 hunters generally enjoy a high success rate primarily due to restricted hunter numbers on private land and a lack of escape cover for deer.

Eastern Franklin County (Kahlotus – GMU 381) is an important wintering area for mule deer that migrate to the relatively mild winter conditions near the Snake River. A small resident population does exist, but most mule deer migrate in from more northern GMUs starting in October. During mild winters, some of these deer remain further north or delay moving into the district. The late general muzzleloader season in Franklin County (GMUs 379 and 381) usually provides a good opportunity to find mule deer in November. The season allows the harvest of bucks 3-point or better, but no longer includes antlerless mule deer as of 2018.

In addition to GMU specific special permit hunts, hunters should look for “Washtucna” permit hunts in the pamphlet that include GMU 381-Kahlotus along with three adjacent GMUs (Figure 4). These replace most of the Kahlotus hunts offered in the past. Washtucna permits include late muzzleloader antlerless, modern antlerless, plus youth, disabled, and senior permits.

Post-hunt surveys in December 2021 yielded an estimated 19 bucks to 100 does in GMU 381 (Figure 5), which is within the management goals for the population. This includes non-legal bucks (spike and 2 point). High hunter success and low buck escapement in the open country where this population lives can contribute to challenges locating legal bucks. Fawn numbers were at 58 fawns per 100 does (Figure 5). The 10-year average has been 65 fawns per 100 does. The extremely dry spring and summer of 2021 likely caused lower fawn survival.

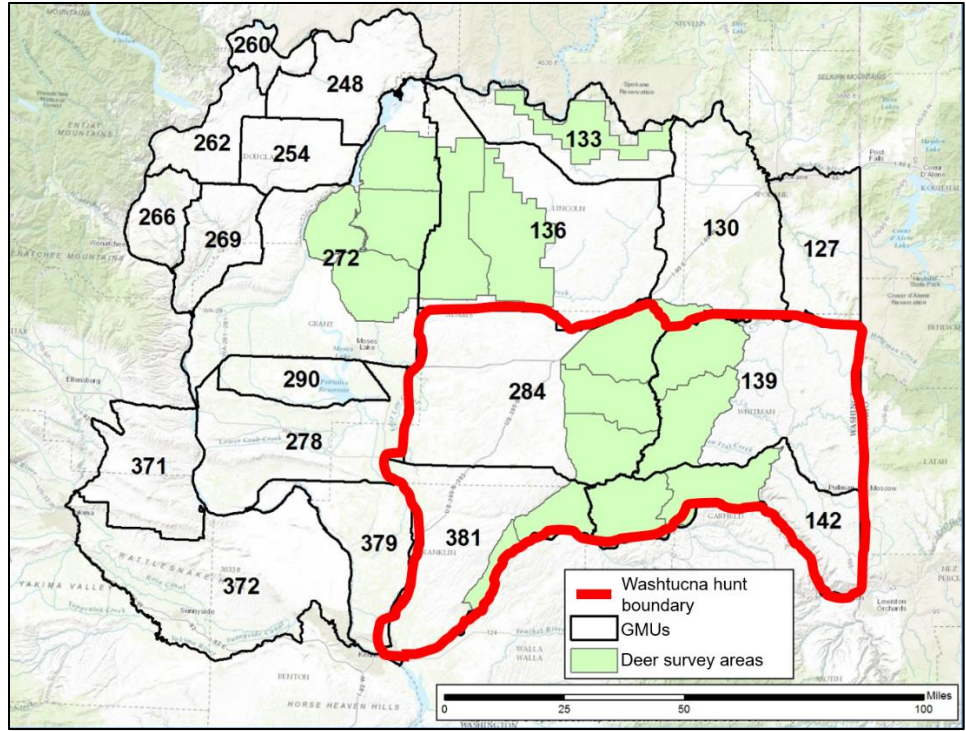


Figure 4. Boundary map of the Washtucna Hunt area encompassing four GMUs.

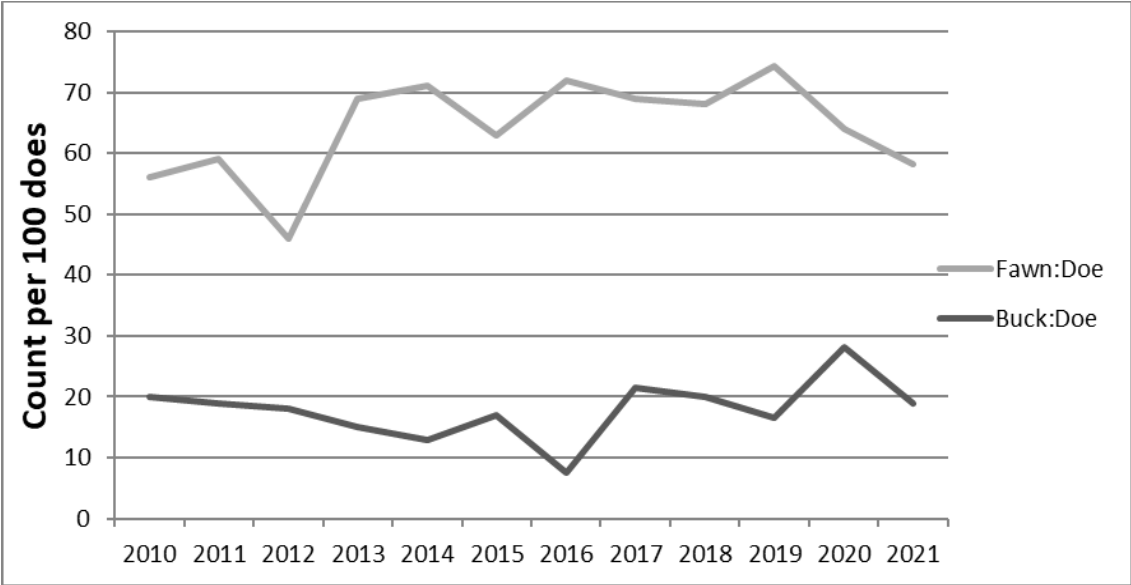


Figure 5. Buck and fawn ratios per 100 does in Kahlotus GMU 381 based on post-hunt road surveys.



**Image 2.** A buck harvested in Franklin County in GMU 381.

In western Franklin County (Ringold – GMU 379), the Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area and the Ringold Unit of the Hanford Reach National Monument ([see weapon restrictions](#)) provide good public hunting opportunities for deer. Like Kahlotus, there is a late Muzzleloader season, as well as early Archery and Muzzleloader seasons, plus the Modern season.

In northern Benton County (Rattlesnake Hills - GMU 372), spend some time scouting for deer in the Thornton and Rattlesnake units of the Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area. There are also some Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) parcels available. Be sure to know who's land you are on, and do not trespass on private property, including when navigating property corners and retrieving game.

In southern Benton County (Horse Heaven Hills - GMU 373), there are deer on BLM lands in the Horse Heaven Hills, scattered tracts of DNR, and private property within WDFW access programs. Part of GMU 372, Deer Area 3372 - Sunnyside (Benton and Yakima counties) provides an early muzzleloader general season opportunity along the Yakima River from Prosser to Union Gap.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) [Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge \(NWR\)](#) Deer Areas 3071 (Whitcomb) and 3072 (Paterson) provide 80 special permits to harvest deer on the NWR, including archery and muzzleloader hunts. Permits are available through the state permit draw in the [Hunting Regs.](#)

There are many properties where hunters can gain access to deer through one of WDFW's private land access programs. Preseason scouting is advisable to learn where to hunt and obtain permission from private landowners where needed. WDFW's [Hunt Planner Web map](#) (select your species, then be sure the PHLO--private lands hunt opportunities, is checked) and [Private Lands website](#) is where updated access info and locations can be found. Access program properties frequently change from year to year and sometimes even within a season. Please double-check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public.

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permit hunts for any GMU are [online](#).

## UPLAND BIRD

Benton and Franklin counties offer upland bird hunter opportunities for Quail, Dove, Pheasant, and even a few Chukar and Partridge if you are lucky (Figure 6). Habitat and weather are the key components influencing the survival and reproductive success of birds. Be sure to review the WDFW [Game Bird Regulations](#) for seasons and regulations.

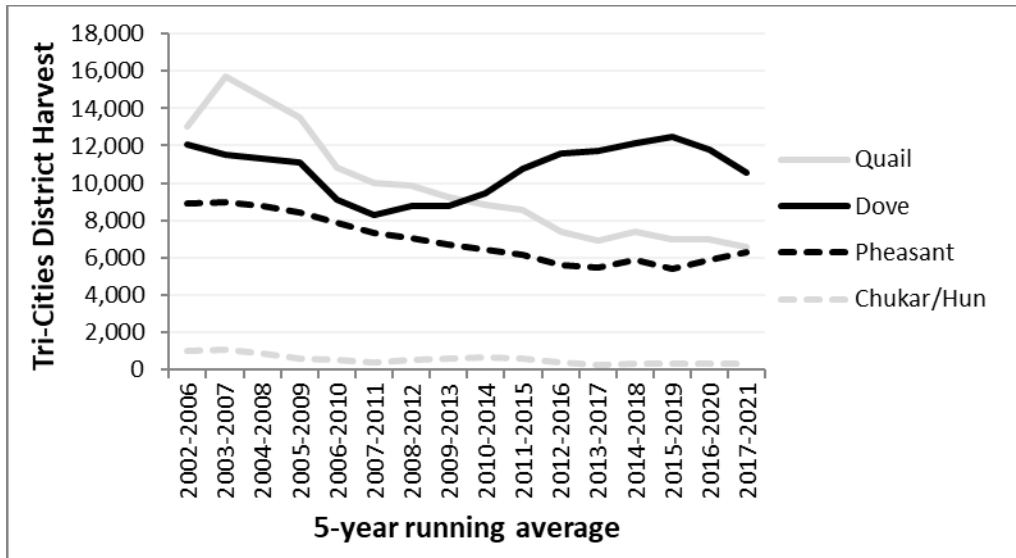


Figure 6. District 4 upland bird harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

## PHEASANT

Ring-necked pheasant hunters and harvest have varied over the past decade in District 4 (Figure 7). Pheasant hunters should focus efforts in dense weedy and grassy areas adjacent to wetlands, streams, and irrigation waterways. Birds may also be found around irrigated farmland. Some of the best pheasant habitat in the district is in north Franklin County on and surrounding WDFW's Windmill Ranch Unit (nontoxic shot), Mesa Lake Unit, and the Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Each of these hunting areas has 2 designated parking areas where hunters are required to park and register, and each allows a maximum of 8 vehicles per lot. Other areas with good pheasant habitat include USFWS' Hanford Reach National Monument's East Wahluke Unit, Ringold (GMU 379), and [Umatilla NWR](#) along the Columbia River, near the town of Paterson.



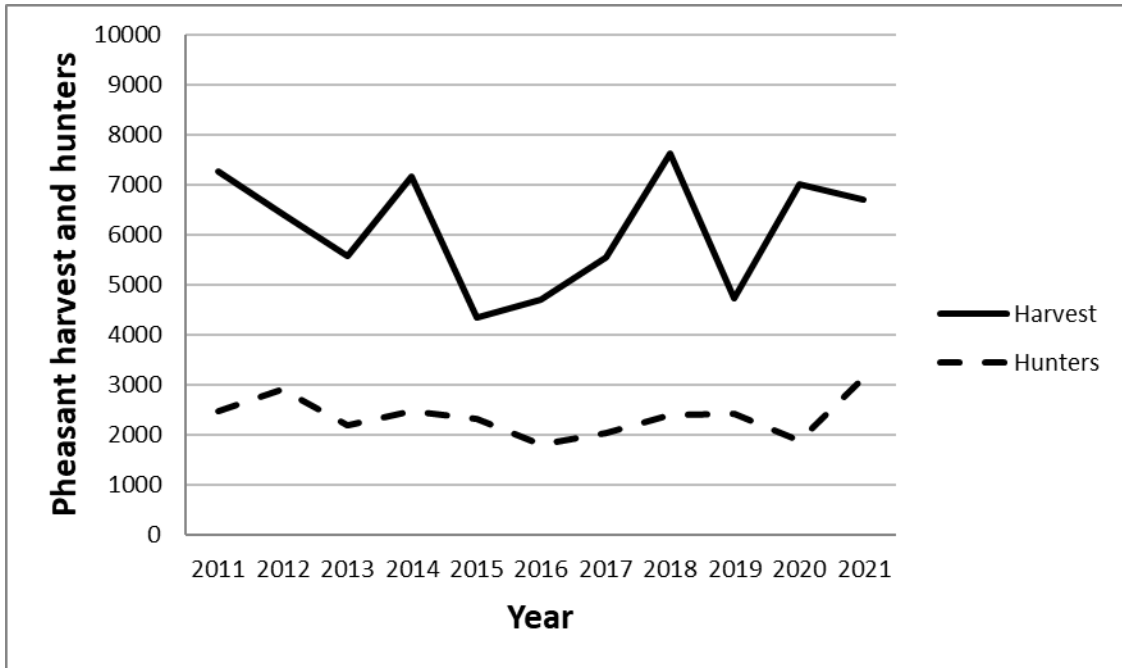


Figure 7. Pheasants harvest and hunters in District 4.

Pursuing birds planted as part of WDFW’s [Pheasant Enhancement Program](#) is a great way to work dogs and gain experience for new hunters. WDFW plants pheasants at four locations in District 4: the Hope Valley Unit of the WDFW Sunnyside Snake River Wildlife Area, and the Toothaker, Big Flat, and Lost Island Habitat Management Units (HMU) held by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) (Figure 8). Pheasant release site locations can be found in the program link above or on WDFW’s [Hunt Planner Web map](#) (be sure to select the Layer > WDFW Places > Pheasant Release Sites). Army Corps HMUs information contact is available [here](#). **Nontoxic shot is required at all pheasant release sites.**

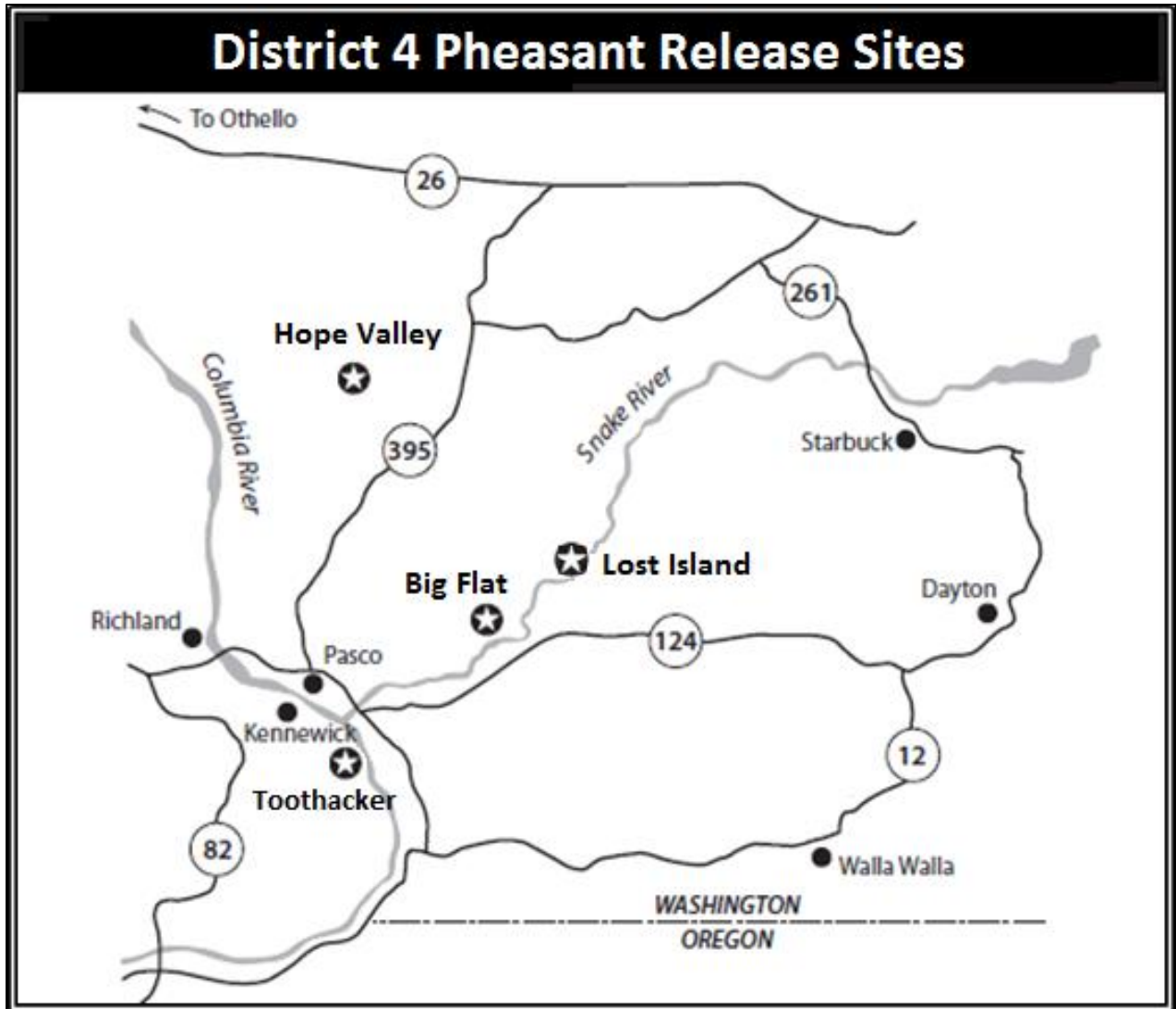


Figure 8. Location of District 4 pheasant release sites.

## QUAIL

Abundant California quail are present in the district. There has been a decreasing trend in harvest numbers over the past decade (Figure 9). The best quail habitat in District 4 is similar to those listed above for pheasant. Also, anywhere along water bodies where riparian and herbaceous vegetation intersects provide quail habitat. An ideal setting is where Russian olives or willows are adjacent to black greasewood or sagebrush.

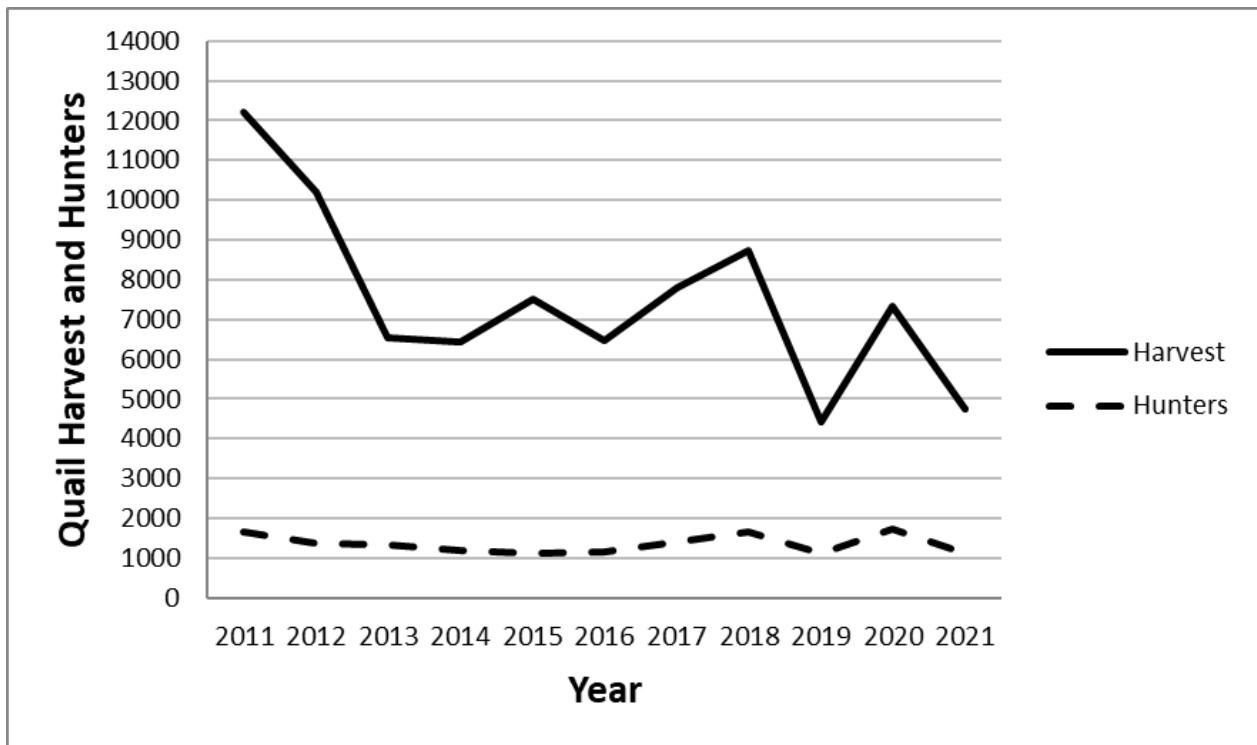


Figure 9. Quail harvest and hunters in District 4.

## DOVE

Mourning dove harvest in District 4 has been decreasing over the past few years while hunter numbers remain steady (Figure 10). There should be an opportunity for hunters to find doves moving through the area and in local patches where production has been successful. Weather patterns play a critical role in determining how many doves are present during the season opener. Focus hunting efforts in or near wheat or corn stubble fields in the irrigated Yakima and Columbia Basins. The best combination of habitat includes a stubble field near water and large isolated trees or power lines where doves perch and attract other doves.

WDFW trapping and banding studies in 2021 are so far indicating good success and production of mourning doves this season indicated by the high proportion of hatch-year birds captured relative to adults.

Dove hunters are also encouraged to harvest Eurasian collared doves, an introduced exotic species that has spread across North America. They are larger than mourning doves with a square tail and thin black half-collar on the back of their necks. This species is usually most abundant in rural and suburban areas near mature trees. Numbers have been increasing across eastern Washington since first appearing in the state in the 1990s. There is no limit and collared doves can be hunted year-round in Washington. A hunting license (big or small game) is needed.

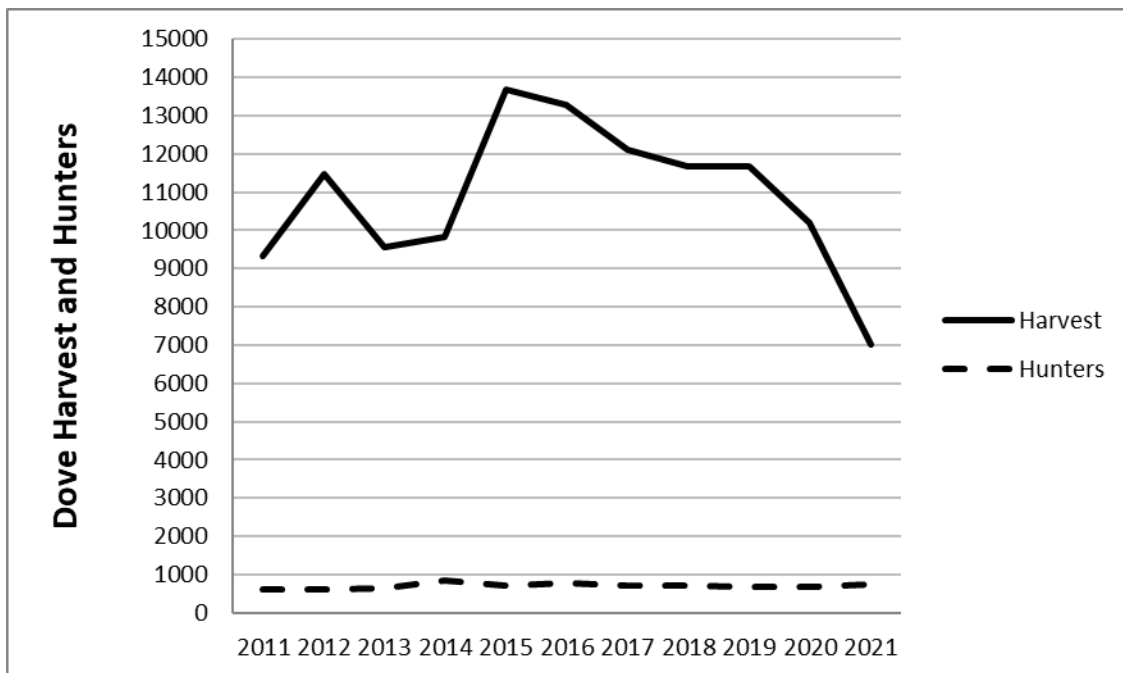


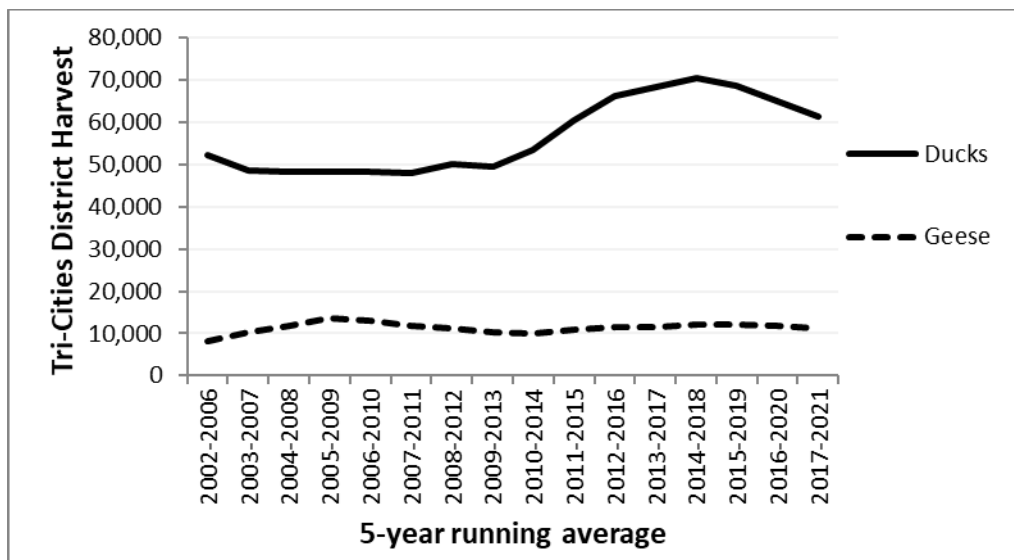
Figure 10. Dove harvest and hunters in District 4.

## WATERFOWL

There are many places to hunt ducks and geese in the district. Small ponds and lakes can be found on WDFW's Windmill Ranch Unit, Mesa Lake Unit, and Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Continued management of the [Sunnyside Wildlife Area](#) units will result in more habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for hunters in the coming years. Several Sunnyside Snake River WLA Units in Franklin County are managed especially for waterfowl hunting. Scootney Reservoir, managed by the [Bureau of Reclamation](#), can also provide good hunting. The Snake and Columbia Rivers and associated water bodies will hold tens of thousands of ducks once the cold weather sets in. See details and map in the Public Lands Section of this document below. Access can be gained at the USFWS McNary and Umatilla NWRs and the Hanford Reach National Monument, or one of the many WDFW managed Water Access Sites on the [Hunt Planner Web map](#) (select Layer > WDFW Places > Water Access Sites).

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting](#) on the WDFW website and be sure to check the [WDFW Migratory Bird Regulations](#) for seasons and rules.

Duck harvest in District 4 has been relatively high since 2015, while the goose harvest has remained stable (Figure 11). After the season opener, hunter success will likely taper off as the local ducks become less naïve and restrict their daytime movements to local reserves and sanctuaries. At that point, hunters will likely have to wait for the migrants to arrive in the mid to late season. Weather patterns will determine when they arrive and where they will congregate. Freezing temps can eliminate opportunity from inland waterbodies and push ducks to the rivers or further south out of state.

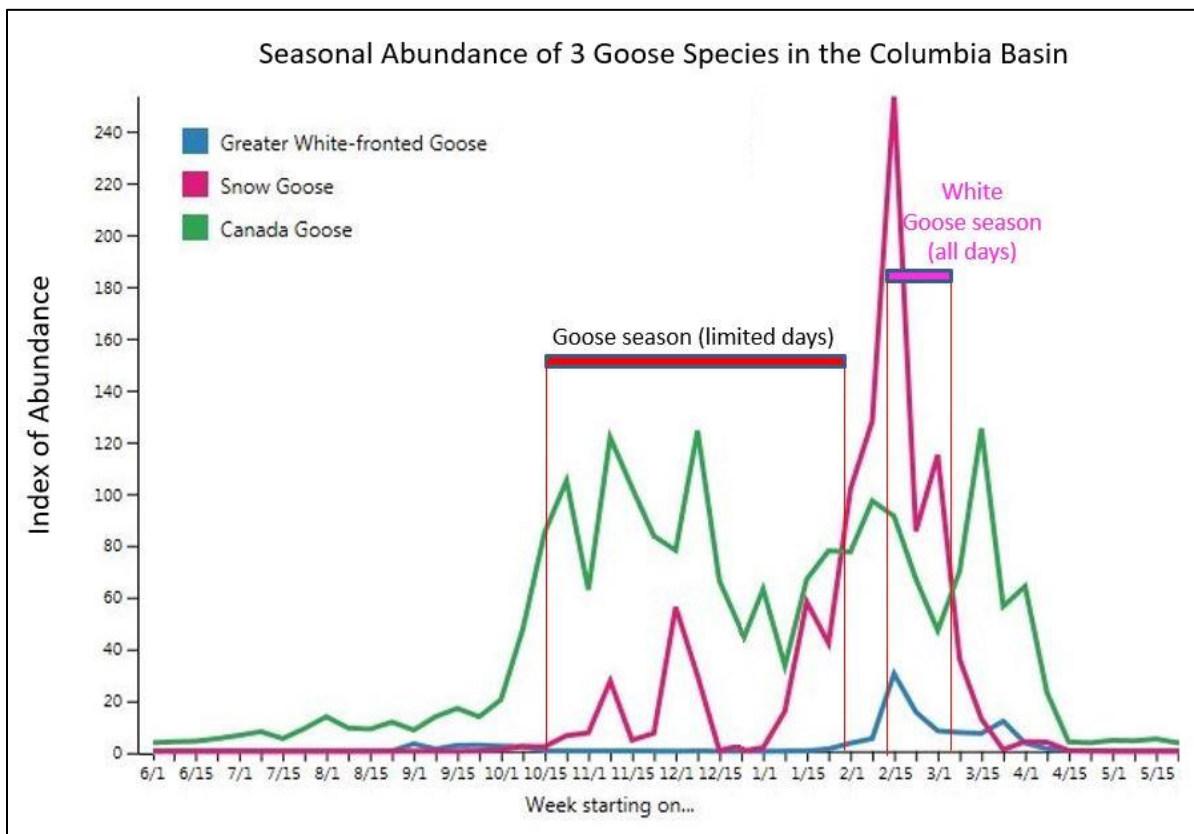


**Figure 11.** District 4 waterfowl harvest trends based on five-year running averages.



Resident Canada geese nest on river islands in the district. In addition, thousands of migratory Canada geese arrive sometime in October or November. They can be pursued in the farm fields near the Snake and Columbia Rivers. Most of the land is private property, so hunters will need to secure permission before hunting.

Changes to the statewide goose regulations in 2017 set daily limits for snow and white-fronted geese in addition to Canada/cackling (dark) geese. Whereas white-fronted geese and the majority of snow geese usually pass through the district before and after the goose season (Figure 12), an increasing number of snow geese have been present in the district during goose season, but peak in February/March. In response to this, WDFW has set up a White Goose Season. The dates in District 4 (Goose Area 4) were expanded further in 2020 for Snow, Ross’s, and Blue Geese from mid-Feb to early March (see [season summary](#) for dates). Snow geese are found in large flocks on farmland near the Snake or Columbia Rivers especially near Plymouth and McNary NWR but are occasionally mixed in with large flocks of dark geese at any location.



**Figure 12.** Seasonal abundance of three goose species in the Columbia Basin relative to hunting seasons. Data source: [www.eBird.org](http://www.eBird.org)



**Image 3.** Goose harvest in the Tri-Cities.

In winters 2017 and 2018, outbreaks of avian cholera occurred at the end of the hunting season in the Tri-Cities area, killing thousands of waterfowl. Botulism outbreaks (summer) and Avian Influenza (spring) are additional wildlife diseases impacting birds in our area fast response can contain outbreaks and hunters are encouraged to report groups of more than five sick or dead birds to WDFW using the link at the top of the WDFW [wildlife diseases webpage](#)

## MAJOR PUBLIC LANDS

Hunting access in Benton and Franklin counties is more limited than in some other parts of the state as much of the district is private property or federal land closed to hunting. However, quality opportunities on both public and private land exist, and WDFW is continually working to expand hunting access.

### WDFW SUNNYSIDE SNAKE RIVER WILDLIFE AREA

This wildlife area (Figure 13) comprises WDFW-owned land in the district and most parcels are open to hunting, but with specific restrictions at some units. Most of the units are managed specifically for wildlife, and enhanced hunting opportunities are possible through crop, habitat, and wetland management. For more information and maps please visit the [WDFW website](#).

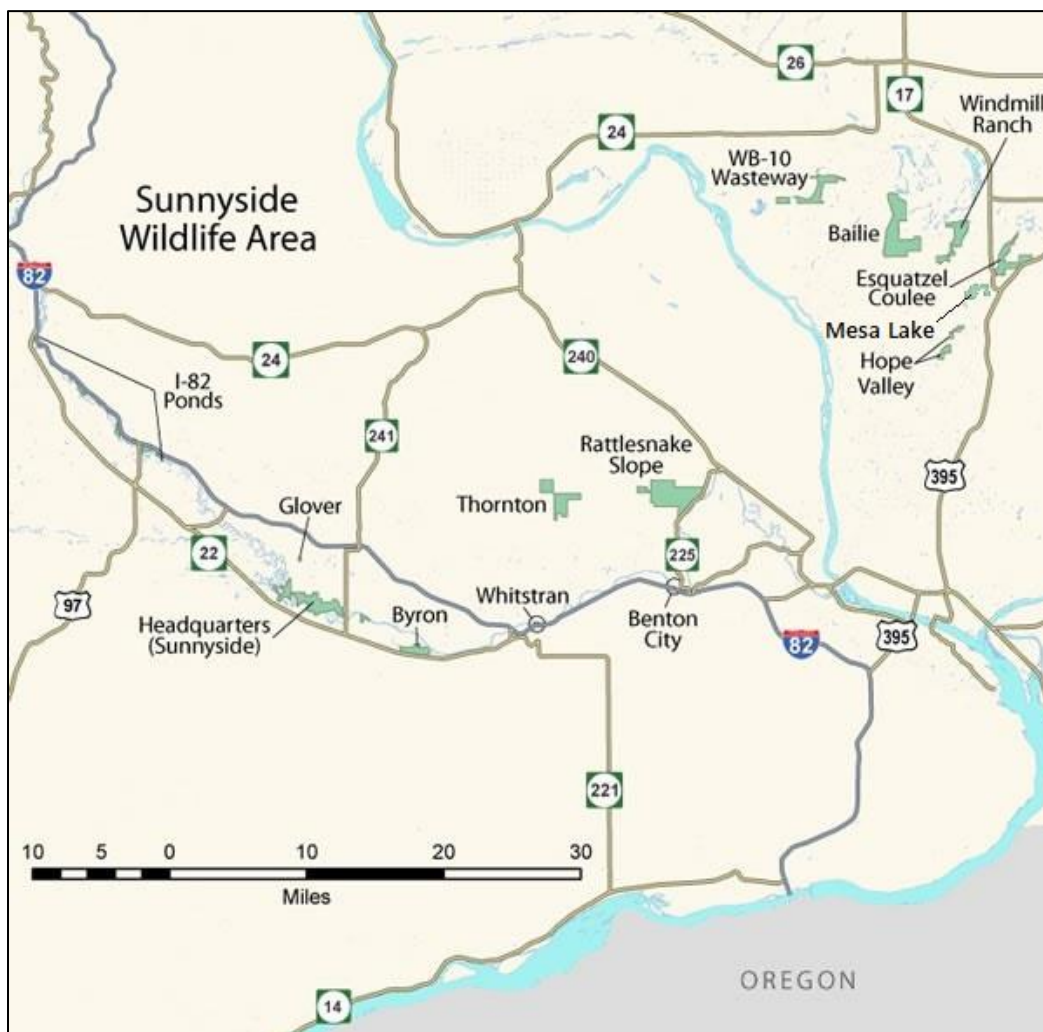


Figure 13. Map of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area units.

## **MID-COLUMBIA RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX**

The USFWS allows hunting on several units of this refuge complex, including a portion of the Hanford Reach National Monument, a portion of the Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge, and certain areas within the McNary National Wildlife Refuge. Hunting lottery information, regulations, and maps can be found [here](#).

## **THE COLUMBIA AND SNAKE RIVERS**

All islands, except privately owned islands, and the Benton County shoreline below the high-water mark, Central Hanford Department of Energy property, and any peninsula originating on the Benton County shoreline between Vernita Bridge on Highway 24 downstream to the Richland city limits are designated as closed areas to hunting wild animals and wild birds. The only exception is waterfowl hunting, which is open below the high-water mark between the old Hanford townsite power line crossing (wooden towers) and the Richland city limits. These details are printed in the [Big Game Regulations](#). Several other closures and reserves impact river hunting in the district (Figure 14).



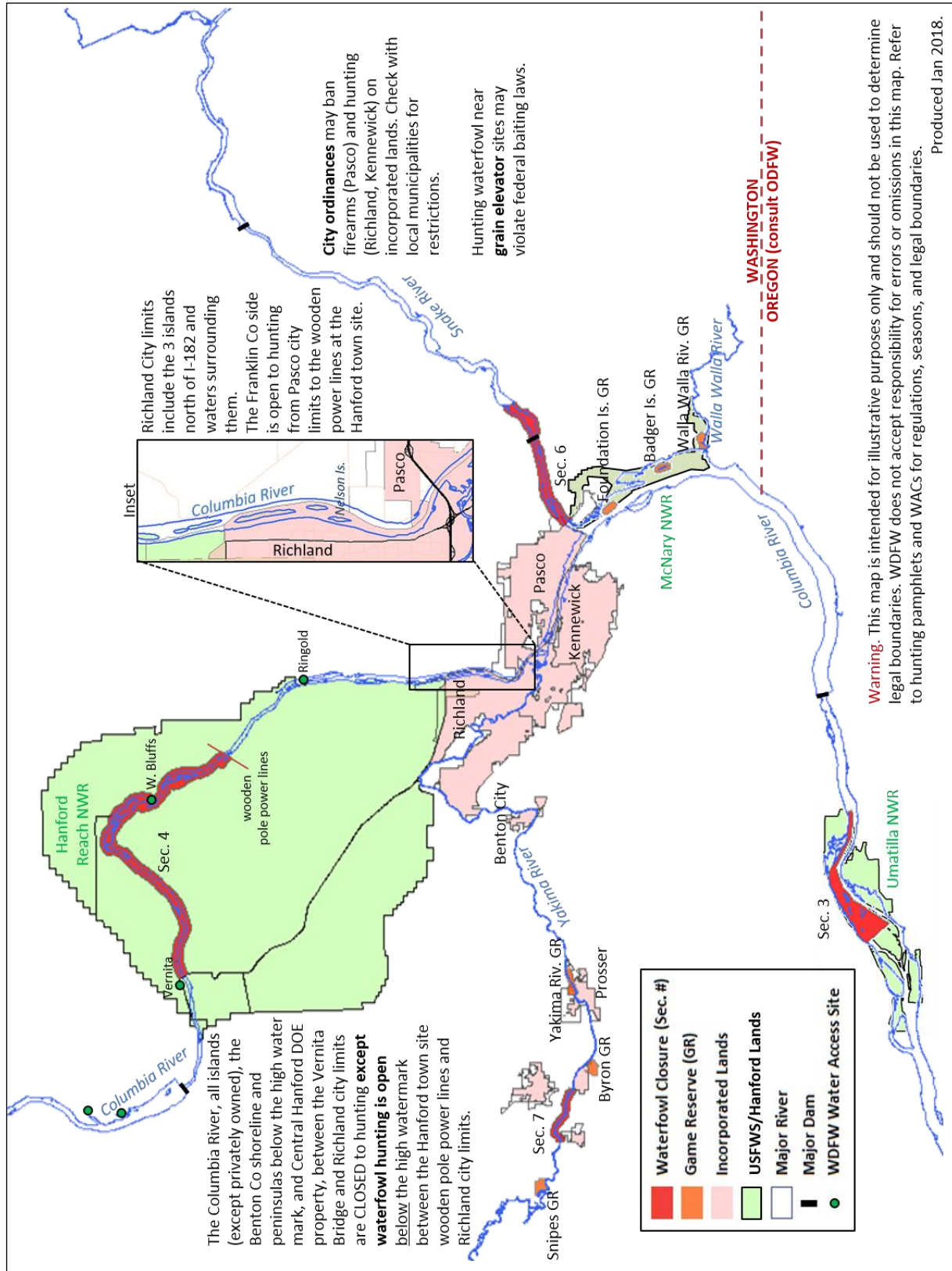


Figure 14. Generalized map of Tri-cities Area rivers, game reserves, closures, and municipalities.



## OTHER PUBLIC LANDS

Each agency/landowner can enact their own weapon and area restrictions related to hunting. Obey all posted signs and contact the land manager with questions.

The DNR manages land that is open to hunting unless otherwise posted. Benton and Franklin counties have a large amount of DNR acreage, but it is often leased to private landowners for agriculture. While leased land is still open to hunting, hunters should always be aware that adjacent landowners are often managing DNR land as part of their business operations, and hunters should be respectful of property boundaries, which may not be signed. Consult a public lands map or [Hunt Planner Web map](#) for or more information (Public lands layer is the default base map).

BLM allows hunting on most of their land and highlights [several BLM properties for hunting](#) across WA, including the Juniper Dunes and Horse Heaven Hills.

The USACE and the Bureau of Reclamation allow hunting on most of their land, but each agency/landowner can enact their own weapon and area restrictions. Several USACE HMUs along the rivers are only open for shotgun and archery hunters.

In Washington, it is NOT LEGAL to cross private or closed land without permission to access public lands. Therefore, access to some parcels of public land may not be available.

## PRIVATE LANDS

WDFW provides and maintains a Private Lands Access program that allows the public to hunt on land owned by cooperating private landowners. In most cases, these landowners receive no financial compensation for their enrollment in the program, and hunters should always respect their property and follow all rules. By being a responsible guest on these private lands, hunters can help ensure they remain open for years to come and will continue to enhance WDFW's mission to expand private lands access. Access properties frequently change year to year and sometimes even within a season. Double-check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public and in the same access program each year.

Information about private lands access sites, including site-specific regulations, locations, season availability, and contact information, can be found [here](#) and at the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#) (select the Layer icon > WDFW Places > Private Land Hunting Opportunities). For questions, contact Seth Hulett, the WDFW Private Lands Biologist for Region 3: 509-778-2630.

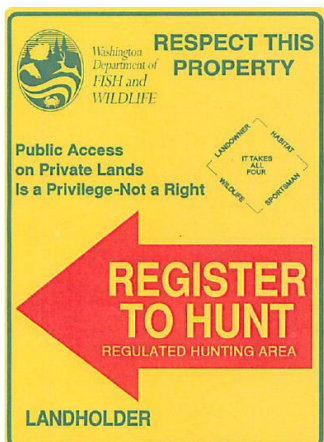
There are four main private land programs. Although each provides public, walk-in only access to private land, they function differently.



**Hunt by Reservation** The Hunt by Reservation program requires hunters to [register online](#). Hunters are required to print out and carry a permit, and they are provided a map of the property. In Benton and Franklin counties, multiple opportunities are available for both big game and bird hunting. **Opportunities are only listed once available for reservation**, which is usually a few weeks prior to the season. [Hunt by Reservation Properties](#)



**Feel Free to Hunt** Feel Free to Hunt is the largest access program in District 4. It allows hunters walk-in access during specified hunting seasons without any prior approval. Most District 4 Feel Free to Hunt properties provide access for mule deer hunting, with some potential for upland bird hunting as well. [Feel Free to Hunt Properties](#)



**Register to Hunt** District 4 has several Register to Hunt sites in Benton County. Register to Hunt requires hunters to sign in at registration kiosks and carry a permit with them. No prior coordination needed. District 4's Register to Hunt sites primarily provide waterfowl and upland bird hunting opportunities. [Register to Hunt Properties](#)

**Hunt by Written Permission** Hunt by Written Permission sites requires hunters to contact the landowner for access. Landowners then issue permits at their discretion and hunters are expected to carry this permit while they hunt. **Landowner contact information can only be found on the yellow signs marking the site.** WDFW does not give out contact info online or by phone. You should make an effort to contact the landowner weeks or months in advance of your season to increase your chance of gaining access. Hunt by Written Permission properties provide opportunities for both big game and bird hunting in District 4. [Hunt by Written Permission Properties](#)

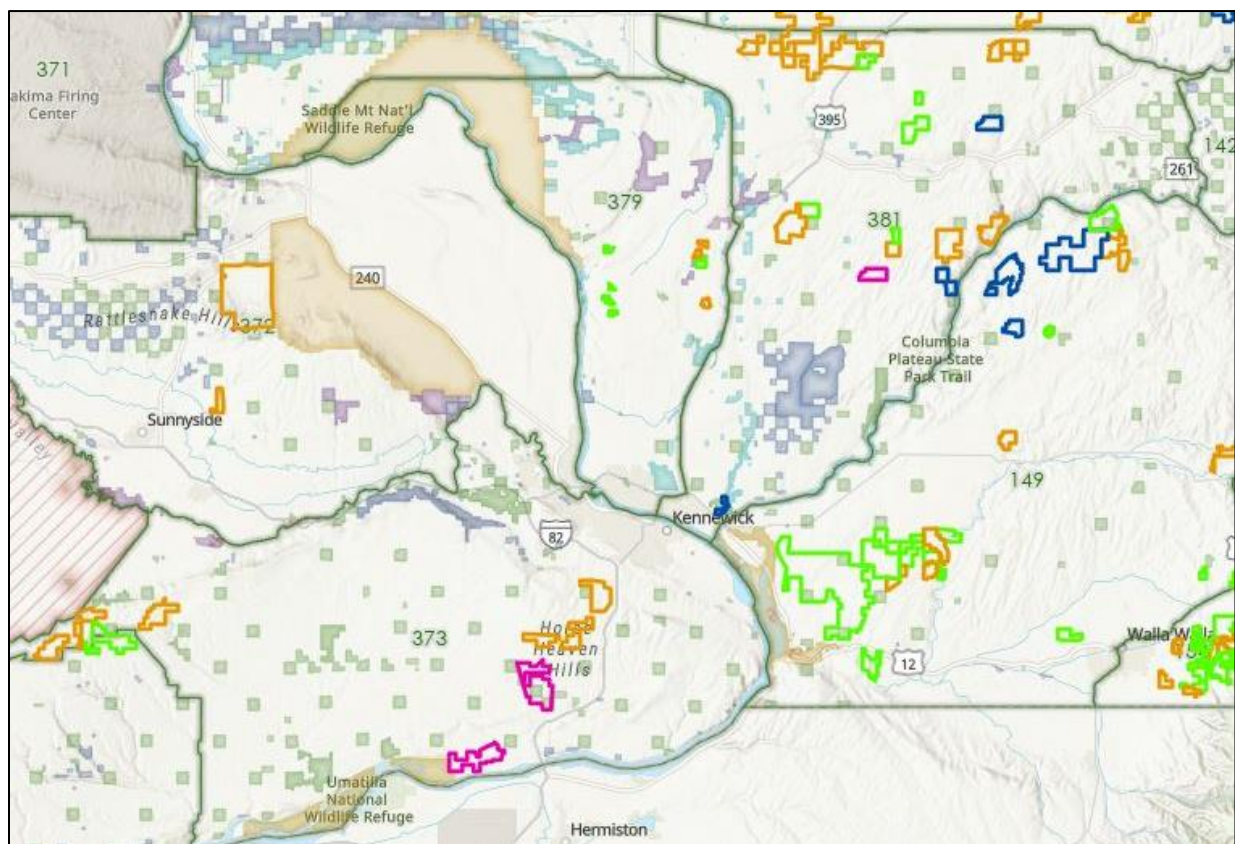


## ONLINE TOOLS AND MAPS

Harvest reports for past general seasons and permits for any GMU and Permit Hunt for all game species are online at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/management/game-harvest>

WDFW has released a Hunt Planner Web Map to search for game seasons and private land access around the state: <https://geodataservices.wdfw.wa.gov/huntregs/>.

A good starting point for hunters looking for a place to hunt is the Web Map that provides hunters with information about public and private lands access points, GMU boundaries, hunting seasons, pheasant release sites, water access points, landscape features such as roads and topography, public lands, and much more (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.** Depiction of private lands access and public lands layers in District 4 from WDFW's Regulations Web Map. Pink, Green, Orange, and Blue bordered parcels are lands in the various public lands access programs. *\*Figure for illustrative purposes only\** Check the [online map](#) for up-to-date access and parcel information.