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DISTRICT 6 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Okanogan County

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All photos by Scott Fitkin unless otherwise noted.

FIRE AND ROAD CONDITIONS UPDATE

As of late July, there were no major fires burning in District 6. Some secondary United States Forest Service (USFS) roads may be closed, particularly in last year's fire perimeters due to some localized flash flood events earlier in the summer. Check with the appropriate USFS district for current conditions.

- [Okanogan National Forest, Methow Valley Ranger District](#)
- [Tonasket Ranger District, Colville National Forest](#)

DISTRICT 6 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 6 is located along the Canadian border in north central Washington and encompasses 10 game management units (GMUs): 203 (Pasayten), 204 (Okanogan East), 209 (Wannacut), 215 (Sinlahekin), 218 (Chewuch), 224 (Perrygin), 231 (Gardner), 233 (Pogue), 239 (Chiliwist), and 242 (Alta).

The western two-thirds of the district, stretching from the Okanogan River to the Pacific Crest, lies on the east slope of the Cascade Range and is dominated by mountainous terrain that gets more rugged as you move from east to west. Vegetation in this portion of the district ranges from desert/shrubsteppe at the lowest elevations to various types of conifer forests, culminating in alpine tundra on the higher peaks, which top out at almost 9,000 feet. More than three-quarters of the land base in this portion of the county is in public ownership, offering extensive hunting access. Game is plentiful and dispersed throughout the area for most of the year, concentrating in the lower elevations in winter when deep snows cover much of the landscape.

GMU 204 includes the eastern third of the district (from the Okanogan River east to the Okanogan County line) and features moderately rolling terrain, generally rising in elevation as you move east. The vegetation changes from shrubsteppe near the Okanogan River to a mix of tall grass and conifer forest throughout the remainder of the unit. This portion of the district is roughly a 50/50 patchwork of public and private land, with the public lands generally being higher in elevation. Again, game is plentiful and dispersed throughout.

Weather in the Okanogan District can be quite variable and capable of changing quickly in the fall. Be prepared for everything from warm, sunny days to the possibility of winter temperatures and significant snow at higher elevations by the second week of October.

Currently, agency biologists are not planning on running the biological check and information station at the Red Barn in Winthrop. Instead, efforts will be focused on Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) monitoring farther east in the state following last year's positive detection in Northwest Idaho. Hunters bringing cervid carcasses from other states are required to comply with current CWD restrictions.

Please be respectful of private land and treat landowners and their property the way you would want to be treated if roles were reversed.



From top: Methow Wildlife Area and Pasayten Wilderness



ELK

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Overall, elk numbers are low in District 6. However, conditions vary noticeably between the east and west portions of Okanogan County. The western two-thirds of the district are not currently covered under a WDFW elk herd management plan, and the existing harvest strategy (any elk general season) is designed to minimize elk numbers to prevent agricultural damage. As such, elk are quite scarce west of the Okanogan River very difficult to find without extensive local knowledge. Hunters harvested only 15 elk in the nine western Okanogan County GMUs combined in 2020.



The eastern portion of the district (GMU 204) is covered by the Selkirk Elk Herd Plan. Its four primary goals are:

1. To preserve, protect, perpetuate, manage, and enhance elk and their habitats to ensure healthy, productive populations and ecosystem integrity.
2. To manage this elk herd for a sustained hunting yield.
3. To manage elk for a variety of recreational, educational, and aesthetic purposes, including hunting, scientific study, cultural and ceremonial uses by Native Americans, biodiversity, wildlife viewing, and photography.
4. To manage elk and elk habitat to minimize human conflicts and agricultural damage.

More specifically, GMU 204 supports part of the Pend Oreille subherd population, where the current management objective is to gradually increase elk numbers while addressing the above four goals. As a result, this unit is now managed with any bull harvest during general modern firearm and muzzleloader seasons. Elk are not currently abundant enough to warrant a survey effort in District 6, but observations suggest numbers continue to increase in GMU 204 and improve harvest opportunity accordingly. Even so, harvest remains modest with 44 animals taken in 2021.

For specific harvest information see the [District 6 General Season Elk Harvest - 2021](#).

WHICH GMU SHOULD ELK HUNTERS HUNT?

As noted above, GMU 204 is the only GMU in District 6 with a significant number of elk. Within this unit, elk tend to be most numerous in the area from Havillah north through the Molson and the Chesaw Wildlife Area, the Waconda Summit / Mount Annie area, and USFS lands bordering the Colville Reservation. In the rest of the district, finding animals is extremely difficult unless you have up-to-date knowledge on one of the few small bands of elk that wax and wane in the western portion of the county.

DEER

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

District 6 supports perhaps the largest migratory mule deer herd in the state, and Okanogan County has long been prized by hunters for its mule deer hunting opportunity. The district also supports significant numbers of white-tailed deer, particularly in GMUs 204 and 215. The District 6 deer management objective is for stable to modestly increasing populations within the social tolerance limits for nuisance and damage issues.



Okanogan District mule deer buck

Steadily increasing post-season fawn:doe ratios and higher than average over-winter fawn survivorship documented in surveys from two of the past three years indicate that deer numbers are slowly rebounding in District 6 in the wake of the extreme fires, severe droughts, and modestly tough winters from the middle part of the last decade. As previously burned winter range continues to recover and mature, this trend is expected to continue. The full effects of last year's record heat and drought on productivity are not fully known yet but should not impact this current hunting season.

The outbreak of blue tongue and epizootic hemorrhagic disease during the summer of 2021 did not appear to have a significant impact on mule deer; but did cause noticeable localized mortality of white-tailed deer. The level of mortality is unknown, but some modest reductions in white-tail numbers are possible, particularly in the eastern half of the district.

WHICH GMU SHOULD DEER HUNTERS HUNT?

All units in District 6 support significant numbers of deer, include large blocks of accessible public land, and offer good to excellent deer hunting opportunity. Mule deer are abundant throughout the county, with the highest densities in the western two-thirds of the district.

Overall, white-tailed deer are less numerous than mule deer in Okanogan County, and in contrast to mule deer, white-tailed deer abundance generally increases as you move east in the district. The largest population is in GMU 204, where white-tailed deer comprise about half of the overall deer population. Although white-tailed deer numbers are less abundant in the western portion of the district, you can still find them in most all drainages up to mid-elevations, particularly those with significant riparian vegetation. The highest concentrations in this area are in the Sinlahekin Valley and surrounding drainages. In many areas west of GMU 204 and outside of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, white-tailed deer frequent private lands. Prospective hunters wishing to target white-tailed deer may want to seek permission in advance of the season to access individual private land.

Hunters harvested 2,228 (2,022 bucks, 206 antlerless) deer in District 6 during the 2021 general seasons. This total is down slightly from last year but still above the five-year average of 2,113. General season success rates rose slightly across weapon types, except muzzleloader which dipped a bit from the prior year. The success breakdown across all GMUs by weapon is as follows: Modern: 18 %, Muzzleloader: 23 % Archery – 26 %, and Multiple – 33 %.

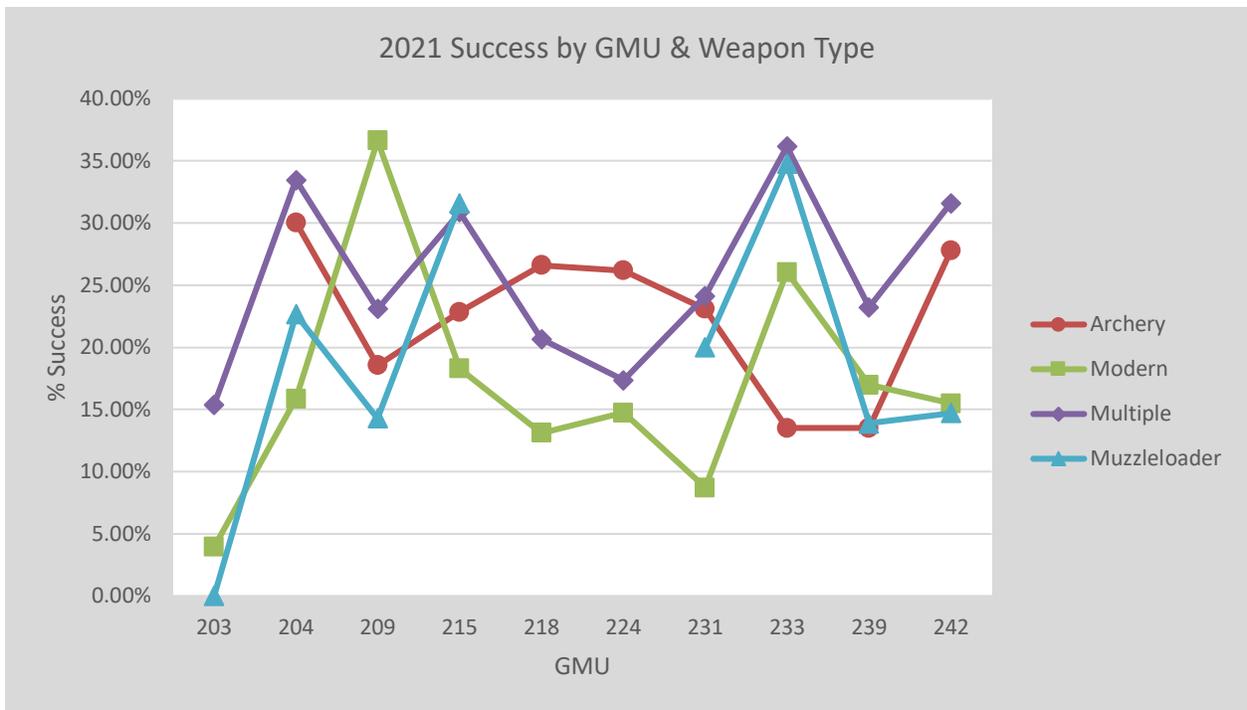


Figure 1. District 6 2021 general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU

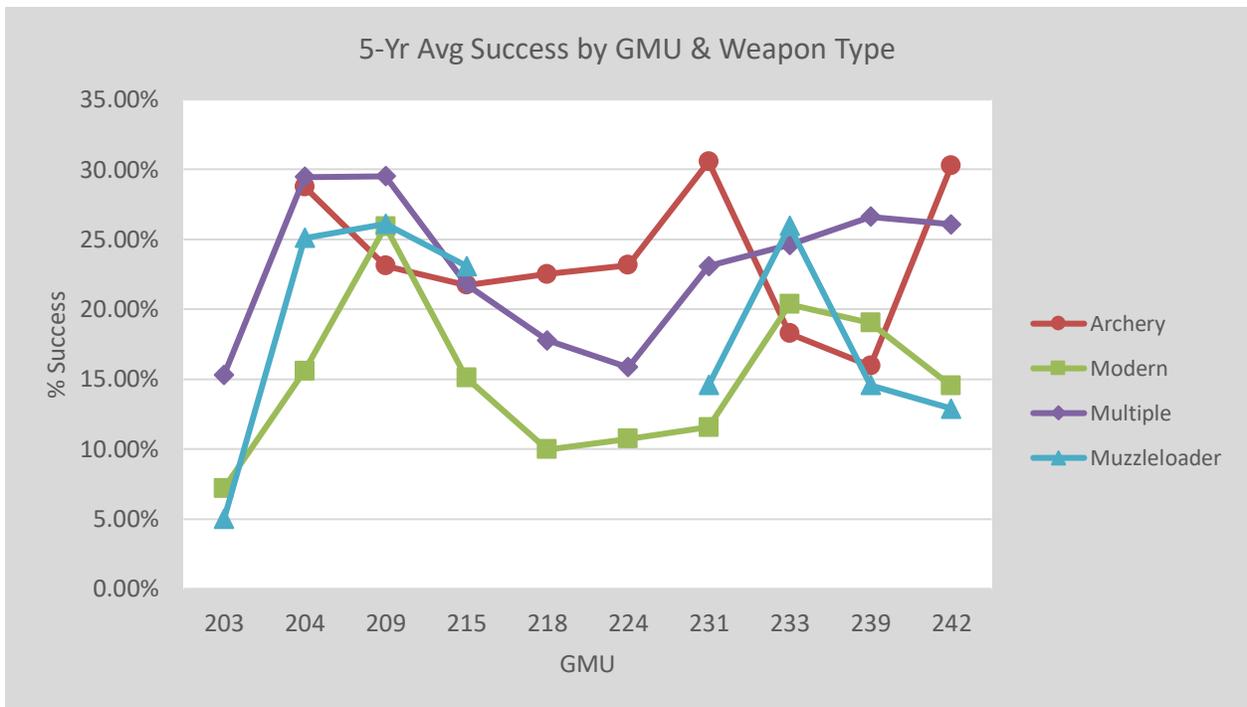


Figure 2. District 6 5-year average general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU

As expected, GMU 204 (the district's largest unit) yielded the greatest overall general season harvest of 700 deer. In the western portion of District 6, GMU 215 produced the most harvest with 343 deer.

For specific harvest information see: [District 6 2021 General Season Deer Harvest](#)
[District 6 2021 Special Permit Harvest](#)

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2022 SEASON

Improving post-season fawn:doe ratios and probable higher than average estimated fawn recruitment in 2021 likely means a modest increase in 2.5-year-old buck availability in 2022. Last December's observed mule deer buck:doe ratio of 20:100 indicates average buck carryover from last season. Total general season harvest and success rates are anticipated to be around the five-year average.

This summer started out cooler and wetter than average but is getting quite hot at the midpoint, suggesting moisture conditions may be typical by early fall. A good growing season in the high country could mean abundant forage and animals might not be quite as concentrated around dwindling green forage as in recent drought years.

Contrary to popular belief, the recent fires are not likely to significantly change deer distribution. Recent data from remote cameras and radio-collared mule deer suggest most animals exhibit either modest short-term displacement from fire or little displacement at all; fidelity of individual deer to their summer range is high. Some exceptions might be noted in areas of extreme fire intensity.

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT MULE DEER

During the early general seasons, deer will generally be widely distributed on the landscape and not yet concentrated in migration areas or on the winter range. Mature bucks are often at high elevations in remote locations if succulent vegetation is available. In general, older, higher elevation burns, including the Tripod, Thirty-mile, Farewell, and Needles Fires, are producing high-quality summer forage and are a good bet for significant deer activity. Although mule deer will use a variety of habitat types, they will often forage well into open environments, particularly at dawn and dusk. As a result, they can often be glassed and stalked from a considerable distance.

During the high hunt, deer will still be spread across the landscape and are found in good numbers throughout the Pasayten Wilderness. Easier access to the higher, more open country for hunters on foot is located at the Harts Pass and Iron Gate trailheads at the western and eastern ends of the wilderness respectively. For those with horses, the Andrews Creek and Billy Goat trailheads offer access to good deer terrain further in.

For youth, senior, and disabled hunters holding antlerless tags, does are spread throughout the district during the general season, so permit holders should be able to find antlerless animals anywhere they have legal access.

During the late permit seasons, most deer will move to winter range areas at lower elevations, often on more southerly slopes, to participate in the breeding season. In District 6, WDFW wildlife areas and immediately adjacent federal lands are good bets for high deer numbers in late fall, although in low-snow years, some mature bucks may linger at higher elevations. In exceptionally mild years, hunters may have to go a bit higher than usual to find deer concentrations. Some GMU-specific recommendations for late mule deer permit holders are as follows:

GMU 215: Look for deer on the south-facing slopes in the Toats Coulee drainage, open portions of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area (SWA), and south-facing slopes of the major drainages to the west of the Sinlahekin, including Cecil, Sarsapkin, and Sinalhekin creeks and their tributaries.

GMU 218: The Rendezvous Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area (MWA), and the Cub Creek, Buck Lake, and Lower Boulder Creek area of the Okanogan National Forest (ONF) are good bets.

GMU 224: Favorite spots are portions of the MWA and adjacent ONF lands in the southern portion of the unit. This includes more open habitat in drainages such as Pearrygin, Ramsay, Bear, Blue Buck, Beaver, and Frazier creeks.

GMU 231: Check out the Big Buck portion of the MWA, as well as the Virginia Ridge, Thompson Ridge, and Little Bridge Creek areas of the ONF.

GMU 233: The main unit and Pogue Mountain Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area (SCWA), the Carter Mountain Unit of the SWA, and public land in the Salmon Creek Drainage are good places to start.

GMU 239: The Texas Creek Unit of the MWA and the Chiliwist Unit of the SWA along with the adjacent Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land offer good opportunities. Upper portions of Finley, Benson, and Texas creeks on the ONF are also worth a look.

GMU 242: Look for deer on the Golden Doe Unit of the MWA and south-facing slopes on public land in the Libby Creek and Gold Creek drainages.



Okanogan District white-tailed deer buck

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT WHITE-TAILED DEER

White-tailed deer in Okanogan County typically migrate less than mule deer and generally favor brushier country with denser cover at lower and middle elevations. Look for white-tailed deer along stream drainages and in other areas with riparian vegetation or thick cover. Like mule deer, white-tailed deer are most active at dawn and dusk but often won't venture as far into larger openings unless under the cover of darkness. Look for white-tailed deer in edge habitats where denser cover abruptly transitions into more open meadows. Many white-tailed deer hunters will wait patiently at a stationary position along an obvious game trail or the forest edge, often employing the use of a blind or tree stand.

During the late permit season, some white-tailed deer summering at modestly high elevations will move a little way downslope, but most will be in the same areas they inhabited during summer. GMU-specific recommendations for late permit holders and late archery season in the western portion of the district are as follows:

GMU 215: White-tailed deer are abundant on the SWA and Chopaka Unit of the SCWA.

GMU 218: Look for deer in the Eight-mile drainage, along the Chewuch River, and in the lower half of the Rendezvous Unit of the MWA (despite the open habitat).

GMU 224: Brushier areas along Bear Creek, Upper Beaver Creek and its tributaries, and basin drained by the West Fork Salmon Creek west of Conconully are good bets.

GMU 231: Good possibilities include the huntable portion of the Big Valley Unit of the MWA, and the portion of the unit in the Twisp River Valley (north of the Twisp River Road). White-tailed deer can sometimes be encountered on the south slopes of the Big Buck Unit of the MWA as they move uphill off private land.

GMU 233: Despite the open terrain, the Happy Hill area of the SCWA is productive, along with the Buzzard Lake Unit of the SWA and adjacent DNR lands.

GMU 239: White-tailed deer can be found on ONF land in the South Summit area between Loup Loup Pass and Leecher Mountain and in wetter areas in the western portion of the Chiliwist Unit of the SWA and adjacent DNR lands.

GMU 242: Productive areas include the brushy areas along the river and in the northern half of the Golden Doe Unit of the MWA, as well as the valley bottom of the Twisp River drainage. Public land along Libby and Gold creeks is also a possibility.

Antlerless white-tailed deer permit holders should look for deer in the same areas mentioned above with the added expectation of a few more deer in the higher reaches of areas like the Twisp River and Eight-mile drainages than might be expected during the late season.

DEER AREAS

For those hunters with second deer permits in Deer Areas 2012 - 2016, remember that those permits are good **only on private land**. Permit holders are responsible for contacting private landowners to secure hunting access.

BLACK BEAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Black bears are abundant and well-distributed throughout District 6 and are managed for sustainable harvest and diverse age structure. Monitored demographic parameters suggest the local population and associated harvest appeared to be relatively stable through 2018. In 2019, the bag limit was raised to two animals in eastern Washington and harvest has increased on average by about 25% in District 6 since. It is yet unknown what effect if any this will have on long-term harvest prospects. Recent monitoring data from a representative portion of Western Okanogan County estimated black bear densities (including cubs) to be about 22 bears per 100 square kilometers. This is about average for eastern Washington. Densities in GMU 204 in the eastern third of the district are suspected to be somewhat higher and we hope to launch a similar monitoring effort there next spring.

For hunters pursuing black bear in the northern Cascades, it is critical to positively identify the bear species, as endangered grizzly bears potentially also inhabit these areas. WDFW's website features some interactive training materials on how to tell the difference between black and grizzly bears. View the Interactive Bear Identification Program and take the Bear Identification Test at [WDFW's website](#).

WHICH GMU SHOULD BEAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All GMUs in the Okanogan District provide good black bear hunting opportunities. In 2021, the success rate (9.7 %) in the Okanogan portion of Bear Management Unit (BMU) 5 remained quite stable, although overall harvest fell modestly, likely a result of reduced access as a result of wildfires. Both harvest (73) and the success rate (10.4%) in GMU 204 in the Northeastern BMU(7) improved noticeably over 2020.

For specific harvest information see: [BBMU 5 2021 Black Bear Harvest](#)
[BBMU 7 2021 Black Bear Harvest](#)

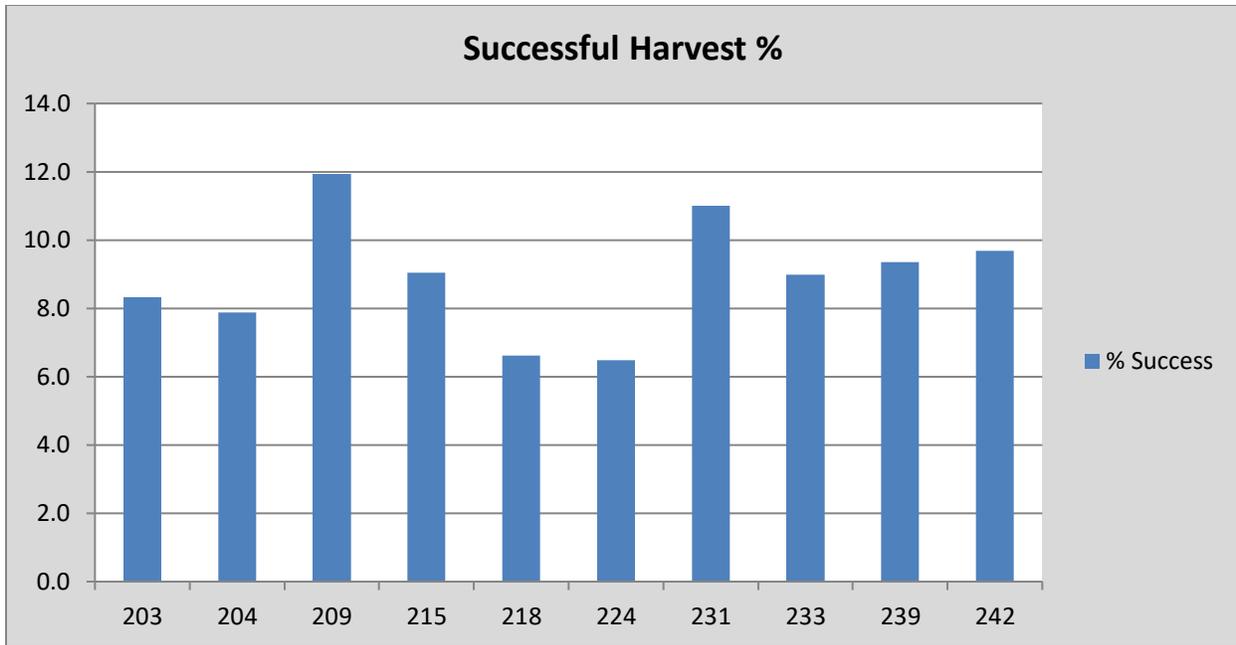


Figure 3. Okanogan District 5-year average black bear harvest success rates by GMU



Black bear

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2022 SEASON

In general, at the beginning of black bear season, animals are likely to be found at middle elevations in areas where berries are peaking. However, this year it appears as though the chokecherry crop has largely failed in many places in the western part of the district so bear distribution in the early part of the season may be unpredictable. The fate of traditional later crops is not yet known. As the season progresses, expect bears to follow the ripening berries to higher elevations where they may stay later than usual due to the late start to the growing season up high this year. As we move later into fall, animals will range over a wider gradient to take advantage of a variety of late-season food sources.

COUGAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

The District 6 cougar population is healthy and dispersed throughout the landscape. In the Okanogan District, cougars are managed by a harvest guideline at the scale of one or two GMUs to better promote stable population structure and high-quality sustainable harvest, while also minimizing human-cougar conflicts.



Cougars follow the deer herds, which means they will be spread throughout the district through late October and concentrate more at lower elevations as deer move to winter range. Much cougar foraging activity takes place at night, so the best opportunities to spot the cats on the move are at dawn and dusk.

WHICH GMU SHOULD COUGAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All Okanogan District GMUs support cougars and are open to hunting. After Jan. 1, individual PMUs (one or more GMUs) close on short notice once the harvest guideline has been reached, and hunters are responsible for knowing if a unit is open or closed. This information is available on the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) or [online](#).

Last season, harvest in District 6 did not exceed the guideline in any PMU and control-related mortality was low. As a result, cougar numbers should be robust and hunting opportunities in District 6 should be good in 2021-22. See the five-year harvest summary table below.

PMU Hunt Area GMUs	Adult Harvest Guideline	2017-2018 Adult Harvest	2018-2019 Adult Harvest	2019-2020 Adult Harvest	2020-2021 Adult Harvest	2021-2022 Adult Harvest
203	4-5	0	0	0	0	0
204	6-8	5	8	4	4	3
209, 215	3-4	5	4	3	6	3
218, 231	4-5	0	2	0	1	0
224	2	1	2	0	0	0
233, 239	4-5	1	4	2	2	0
242, 243	5-6	1	5	3	2	1

Table 1. District 6 cougar harvest guidelines and 5-year harvest by GMU

WATERFOWL

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Okanogan District offers modest waterfowl hunting opportunities as compared to many other areas of the state. The largest concentrations of birds occur at the southern edge of District 6, at the mouth of the Okanogan River and on the Columbia River. The main stem of the Okanogan and Upper Similkameen rivers and the larger lakes and potholes in the Okanogan Watershed are good secondary sites. Good public river access is found at the Washburn Island Unit of the Wells Wildlife Area, the Driscoll-Eyhott Island Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, and the Similkameen-Chopaka Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area.



From top: lesser Scaup pair and Canada geese

Water levels in smaller local potholes remained low, despite the wet spring and early summer. River levels are currently running above normal but should be at normal flow levels by fall. Aside from water levels, waterfowl hunting opportunities are mostly dependent on the number of migrants coming from Canada and Alaska, and how long water remains ice-free throughout the district.

For specific harvest information see: [September Canada Goose Harvest by County](#)
[Late Canada Goose Harvest by County](#)
[Duck Harvest by County](#)

FOREST GROUSE

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

The Okanogan supports strong populations of ruffed, dusky (blue), and spruce grouse found throughout the forested areas of the district. Ruffed grouse are generally associated with deciduous tree cover at lower to middle elevations, particularly in riparian habitats. During hunting season, dusky (blue) grouse are generally encountered in the mid to upper elevation conifer forests, often moving to ridges as snow begins to accumulate. Spruce grouse are found in higher elevation conifer forests throughout the district on a year-round basis. Additional tips on hunting forest grouse can be found at [Forest grouse hunting tips](#).

Forest grouse populations (particularly dusky and spruce grouse) remain below historical norms within the boundaries of the many recent large wildfires within the district. These fires burned in some of the best and most densely occupied forest grouse habitat in the district. However, grouse habitat within the burns is improving annually. Some of the older burns such as the Needles, Farewell, and 30-mile fires have been aggressively colonized by deciduous vegetation and likely now support good, ruffed grouse populations. Recovery of the conifers for dusky and spruce grouse is slower but is beginning to be used again in some portions of the Tripod fire. Bird numbers outside of burned areas appear to be relatively stable.

HARVEST TRENDS AND 2022 PROSPECTS

The annual mixed harvest of dusky, ruffed, and spruce grouse in 2021 dropped by about 27% from the previous year in District 6. This is likely due to a loss of habitat and access during last year's two large wildfires. The extend cold, wet spring and early summer may have been hard on broods so availability of fledgling birds may be down a bit this year. **Remember, the forest grouse season now starts Sept. 15 and runs through Jan. 15. This change is designed to bolster grouse numbers by reducing pressure on brood hens in the early fall when they are more vulnerable.**

For specific harvest information see: [Forest Grouse Harvest by County](#)



From left: female spruce grouse and male ruffed grouse.

PHEASANTS

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Pheasants occur at low densities and in a patchy distribution throughout the Okanogan watershed portion of District 6, with most harvested birds coming from pheasant release sites. This year, pheasants will again be released at the Bureau of Reclamation's Hegdal and Kline sites, and at the Chilliwist Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area. What little wild production exists within the county comes mostly from private land. Hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private property. Additional hunting tips for pheasants can be found at [Pheasant hunting tips](#).

The release sites are mapped in the Eastern Washington Pheasant Release booklet found here: [Eastern Washington Pheasant Release Program](#). Hunters are reminded that nontoxic shot is required for **all** upland bird hunting on **all** pheasant release sites statewide. Both participation and harvest declined last year, possibly the result of poor natural wild production.

For specific harvest information see: [Pheasant Harvest by County](#)



Pheasant release – Photo by Jeff Heinlen

QUAIL

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Quail are locally abundant and widespread throughout the district's lower elevation shrubsteppe and open pine forest habitats. District 6 Wildlife Areas offer good access to quail habitat. In 2021, hunters took 3,886 quail in Okanogan County, down substantially from 2020. This may have been the result of the extreme heat and drought on broods, and the unpleasant hunting conditions in the early season. The cool, wet spring this year was likely hard on early broods, but quail frequently have multiple clutches in a season so the effects on the hunting season may not be as noticeable as with some other game birds. Tips for hunting pheasants are available at [Quail hunting tips](#).

For specific harvest information see: [Quail Harvest by County](#)

TURKEYS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The fall turkey season in District 6 is now a general season opportunity in all GMUs from Sept. 1 through Dec. 31. Turkey numbers are highest in GMUs 204, 215 and 239, but all GMUs except 203 offer good opportunities. Hunters can find turkeys in scattered groups throughout the district where they often concentrate on private land near agriculture areas later in the fall. Prospective hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private land. Hunters harvested 218 birds during the general fall season in North Central Washington last year. This number is expected to climb as hunters gain more experience with the new fall general season.

For specific harvest information see: [Statewide Turkey Harvest by Management Unit](#)



Wild turkeys

CHUKAR AND HUNGARIAN (GRAY) PARTRIDGE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In general, Hungarian partridge populations are widely distributed and locally abundant throughout the district's shrub-steppe habitats. Birds are frequently encountered on most all wildlife area units in the district. Scattered groups of chukar are found in the rocky areas in lower elevations of District 6. For instance, the steep hills along the Similkameen River in the north part of the Okanogan Valley and the rocky areas of the Pateros and Indian Dan Wildlife Areas typically hold good numbers of birds. See tips for hunting chukar and Hungarian partridge at [Hungarian partridge hunting tips](#), [Chukar hunting tips](#).



Hungarian Partridge

Combined participation and harvest of chukar and Hungarian partridge in 2021 remained fairly stable despite last year's heat and drought stress. The effects of this year's cool, wet spring are unknown.

For specific harvest information see: [Hungarian Partridge Harvest by County](#)
[Chukar Partridge Harvest by County](#)

DOVE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Look for doves in planted food crops in the Sinlahekin and at lower elevations on other public lands. Both dove hunting participation and harvest remained low, but relatively stable in fall noticeably in 2021. Hunting success often depends on warm weather keeping the birds in the area through the season.

For specific harvest information see: [Mourning Dove Harvest by County](#)



Mourning dove on the Methow Wildlife Area