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Washington
Department of
**FISH &
WILDLIFE**



Snow geese take flight at the Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters' Unit. Photo by Robert Waddell / WDFW

2023 DISTRICT 14 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Skagit & Whatcom Counties

TABLE OF CONTENTS

District 14 General Overview	1
Current Species Status	4
Elk	6
Elk Hoof Disease (Treponeme bacteria)	10
Deer	13
Adenovirus Hemorrhagic Disease	15
Bear	17
Cougar	20
Mountain Goat	21
Upland Birds	23
Pheasant	23
Forest Grouse	24
Dove: Mourning & Eurasian collared	25
Band-tailed Pigeon	26
Waterfowl	28
Dabbling Ducks	28
Sea Ducks	32
Pacific brant	32
Canada Geese	34
Lesser Snow Geese	34
Hunter Access	38
Public Lands	40
Island Unit	41
Samish Unit	41

Telegraph Slough.....	42
Johnson/DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit	43
Skagit Bay Estuary	43
Whatcom County.....	45
Lake Terrell Unit	45
Tennant Lake Unit.....	46
Nooksack Unit.....	47

DISTRICT 14 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 14, comprised of Skagit and Whatcom counties, is the most northwestern in the state. The district's western extent is associated with the marine waters of Puget Sound and features a vibrant and varied agricultural land base. The lowlands of the Skagit Flats and western Whatcom County support abundant wildlife species and populations. Most notable are the diverse and large flocks of resident and wintering waterfowl species, offering world-class hunting opportunities.

The Skagit and Nooksack rivers are the two primary river systems in the district. They are fed by the Cascade Mountains and flow into Puget Sound. Most lower-elevation forested uplands within these watersheds are owned or managed by private timber companies and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR). These lower-elevation working forests provide reasonable to excellent big game hunting opportunities for elk, black-tailed deer, black bear, and cougar. Federally owned public lands, such as the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and North Cascades National Park, comprise many higher elevation forest lands within the district, including the Ross Lake National Recreation Area, where hunting is allowed. These federal lands are associated with the North Cascade Mountains and support game species such as mountain goats, black bears, and black-tailed deer.

We suggest the [WDFW Hunt Planner Webmap](#) for access information and e-scouting.



Figure 1. View of the North Fork Nooksack River in Whatcom County – Photo by Robert Waddell

From north to south, the core game management units (GMUs) that comprise District 14 are Nooksack and Diablo (GMUs 418 and 426), which are mainly in Whatcom County, and Sauk (GMU 437), which is almost entirely within Skagit County. Portions of North Sound, Stillaguamish, and Cascade (GMUs 407, 448, and 450) also fall within the district boundaries (Figure 2).

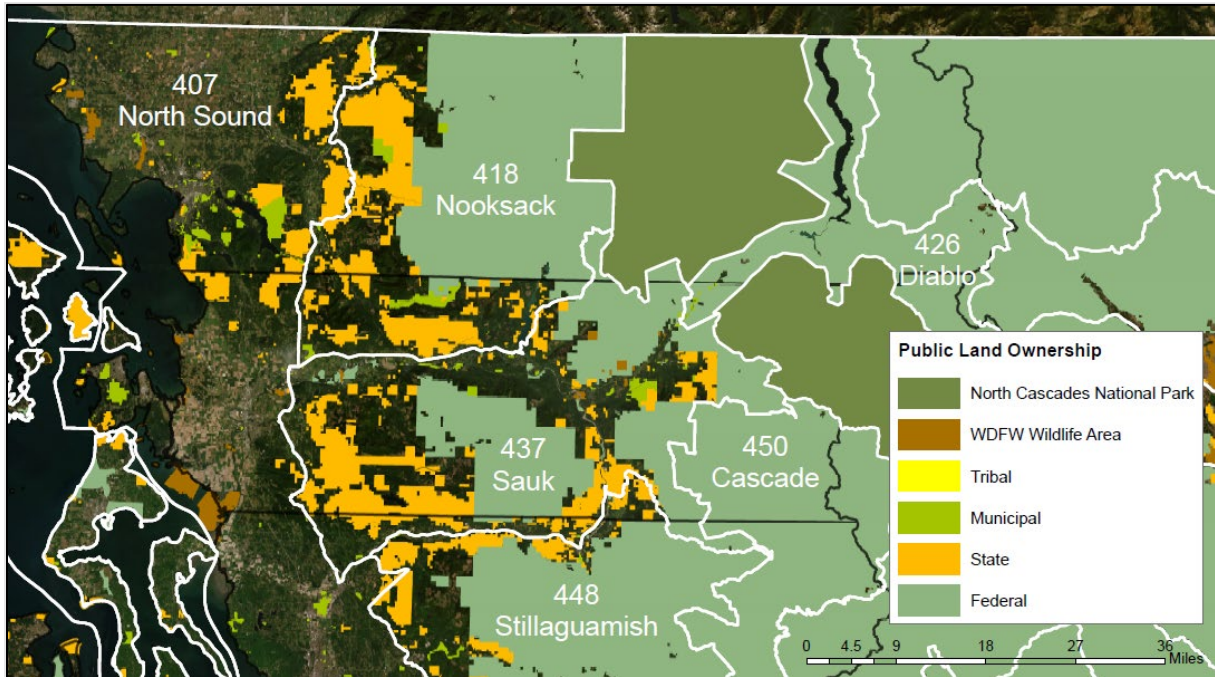


Figure 2. Game Management Units (GMUs) in Skagit and Whatcom counties

Among the many hunting opportunities within this district, perhaps the most notable are:

- Both saltwater and inland waterfowl hunting opportunities with the highest harvest of ducks and geese in Western Washington. Statewide, it boasts the second-highest duck and goose harvest.
- The state's most diverse waterfowl species hunting opportunities include hunts for lesser snow geese, Canada geese, Pacific black brant, long-tailed ducks, and scoters.
- Extensive walk or bike-in access to public and private forest lands that do not currently charge an access fee for hunting big game and/or forest grouse.
- Special permit only, quality bull elk hunts within the North Cascades elk herd, with trophy quality animals, liberal season dates, and high success rates.
- Once-in-a-lifetime mountain goat harvest opportunities for six Mt. Baker Wilderness Area permit holders.

Lands across District 14 are famous for a variety of year-round recreation activities. Always respect safety corridors and No Shooting Areas. Remember to be a good hunting and outdoor steward. Be courteous and respectful of others to support quality experiences for everyone. Hunt in a manner that seeks to avoid negative interactions with other users whenever possible, such as hunting during early morning hours and avoiding busy trails. Please pick up after yourself and don't leave a gut pile out in the open – cover, bury, or hike it out and dispose of it properly. For the benefit of all fish and wildlife, strongly consider utilizing copper or non-toxic ammunition even in locations and for game species where it is not required. Similarly, less environmentally harmful shotgun shells with biodegradable wads are becoming increasingly available.

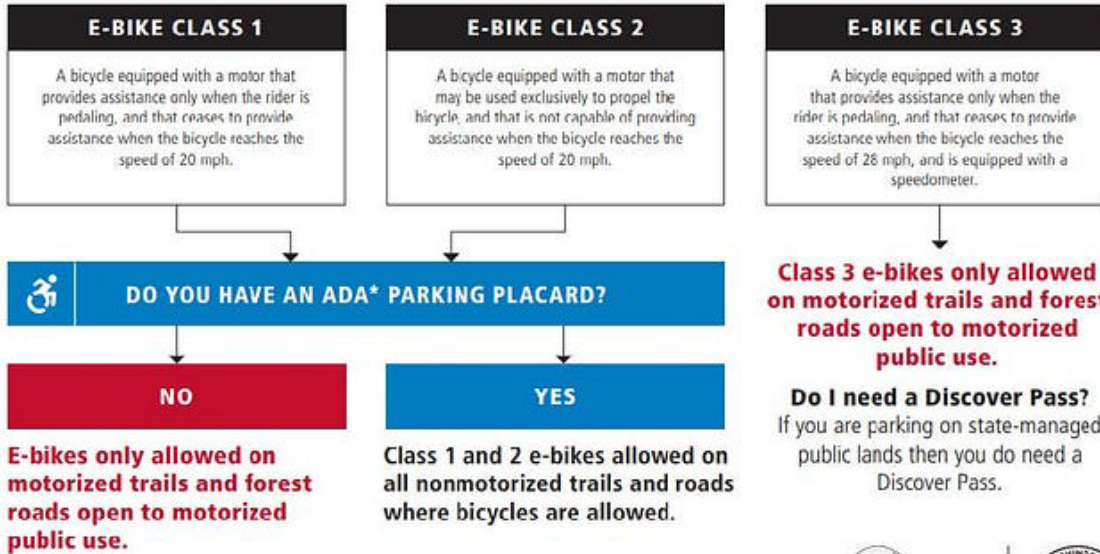


Figure 3. Johannesburg Mountain looming over the Cascade River Valley – Photo credit Callie B. Moore

For hunters interested in using e-bikes, note that they are typically considered motorized vehicles allowed only on roads and trails open to other motorized use (local regulations may vary). Hunters should check with each public or private landowner to ensure they are allowed. Please see the [Electric-assisted bicycles on WDFW-managed lands](#) for the most recent information.



Current Electric-Assisted Bicycle Rules



MTI-E-BIKES PHOTO: ENGLISH

* ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. RCW 46.04.169, RCW 46.19.030. Temporary e-bike policies are implemented by WA Bill 5452 (2020) effective July 25, 2021. Violators are subject to civil or criminal prosecution under WAC 332.52 and other applicable law. Fines up to \$99 may be issued if violated.



CURRENT SPECIES STATUS

The primary big game species in District 14 are elk, black-tailed deer, cougar, black bear, and mountain goat. Each species remains open for hunting with restrictions, as outlined in the [Washington 2023 Big Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet. Over-the-counter tags for cougars are available for the entirety of District 14. Over-the-counter tags are also available for elk (GMUs 407 and 448 only), black-tailed deer, and black bears. Elk hunts in GMUs 418 and 437 and all mountain goat opportunities are managed as special permit-only hunts. Tag availability is based on the sensitivity of each species and their populations to hunting. For elk, the population estimate for the North Cascades elk herd remains below the population objective, and mountain goats have low reproductive rates that limit harvest opportunities in most North American populations.

Like most of Western Washington, District 14 does not host native upland game bird populations (other than forest grouse) and is not managed for these species. However, WDFW will continue implementing a pen-raised pheasant release program in Skagit and Whatcom counties during the 2023–2024 hunting season. District 14 has healthy populations of forest grouse, including ruffed, dusky, and sooty (formerly blue) grouse. Hunters after forest grouse enjoy a liberal season from Sep. 15 – Jan. 15.

Due to high overall population sizes and stable reproductive rates of waterfowl, states within the Pacific Flyway will continue to enjoy a liberal hunting season structure for most species with ample hunting days and bag limits. Northern pintail's decrease to a one-bird daily bag limit still applies this season in response to population estimates for this species falling below established threshold limits. Other restrictions for sea ducks will continue into this season.

The statewide closure to the harlequin duck harvest implemented last season will continue in 2023-24. Electronic calls are ONLY allowed during white-goose only season segments in Goose Management Area 1 from Feb. 10-20, 2024.

All waterfowl hunters must apply for and possess a special migratory bird authorization when hunting lesser snow geese, Pacific brant, and sea ducks, which include long-tailed ducks; surf, white-winged, and black scoters; and common and Barrow's goldeneye. Additionally, a harvest report card must be submitted by each hunter by March 20, 2024, regardless of harvest success. Please reference page 26 in the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet for information on the required Authorization and Harvest Record cards.

ELK

The North Cascades (Nooksack) elk herd (NCEH) continues to grow and expand into areas of formerly unoccupied habitat, including agricultural areas where elk-related crop damage can occur. A post-hunt survey conducted in March resulted in an estimated population of around 1,600 elk within the herd's core area. The 2023 survey indicated a bull-to-cow ratio of 18 bulls per 100 cows, within the WDFW objective of 12–20 bulls per 100 cows. The calf-to-cow ratio was estimated at 22 calves per 100 cows. A calf-to-cow ratio of 40 calves or greater per 100 cows is considered excellent calf recruitment. For more information on elk management within this herd, visit the [WDFW North Cascades Elk Management webpage](#).



Figure 4. Successful hunter with a mature bull in GMU 437 – Photo by Ron Howard

The WDFW population objective of approximately 2,000 elk has yet to be met. Since establishing a very limited hunt of this population in 2007, hunting opportunities have been few but have increased to the current levels that have been in place for a few years. The current harvest strategy provides some recreational and damage-related harvest while allowing the population to continue to grow.



Figure 5. Mature GMU 418 bull – Photo by Kurt Russell

The North Cascades elk herd offers some of the best special permit bull hunting opportunities in Western Washington. Archery, muzzleloader, and modern firearm hunters fortunate enough to draw one of 50 available permits have the chance to harvest a bull elk with an “any bull” tag in GMUs 418 and 437 (29 permits in GMU 418 and 21 permits in GMU 437). Securing applicable access permissions and sufficient scouting are essential for a successful hunt.

Due to limited hunting pressure and lengthy seasons, the annual harvest success rate since 2007 has been relatively high, ranging up to 100% depending on the hunt method type. During the 2022-23 season, the harvest success rate in GMU 418 for all hunt method types combined was 62%, with 18 of 29 permit holders harvesting a bull elk. At least 11 of these bull elk had antlers with five points or better (nine bulls had antlers with six points or better). In GMU 437, eight of 21 permit holders harvested a bull elk for a 38% success rate for all weapon types combined. At least five of these bull elk had antlers with five points or better.

The [WDFW Private Lands Access Program](#) has partnered with Sierra Pacific Industries to provide access to their properties within GMU 418 for all GMU 418 elk special permit holders. This program will provide information about access to these lands to permit holders before the 2023 hunts. Within GMU 418, hunters looking for the highest chance of success should focus most of their efforts within the core elk area that includes: a northern boundary from Acme due east to Baker Lake, an eastern boundary along the western shorelines of Baker Lake, and Lake Shannon to Highway 20, a southern boundary along Highway 20 to its juncture with Highway 9, and a western boundary of Highway 9 from Sedro-Woolley to Acme. However, hunters may find pockets of elk, including some high-quality bulls, outside this core area.



Figure 6. Elk on private property in Skagit Valley in GMU 437 survey of North Cascades elk herd
– Photo By Robert Waddell



Figure 7. WDFW and Tribal Co-Manager aerial– Photo by Robert Waddell

Hunters who draw a special permit in GMU 437 are no longer restricted to hunting in Skagit Valley within the former Elk Area 4941 boundary. Though permitted hunters may access the entirety of GMU 437, most elk likely will be in the northern third of the GMU, with many in Skagit Valley on private property. Therefore, securing access to private property in the valley and islands in the Skagit River can increase your chances of success in this GMU.

Master Hunters and youth, senior, and disabled hunters who draw one of the 28 permit opportunities for antlerless elk should consider securing access to private lands within Skagit Valley, where opportunities are likely to be best. In 2022, 12 of 28 permit holders harvested a cow elk for a 43% success rate. All Special Permit holders for GMU 437 will be mailed a letter with tips regarding hunting on private land in Skagit Valley before the 2023 hunts.

General season harvest opportunities for any elk in GMU 407 (North Sound) in Skagit and Whatcom counties and bulls with a three-point minimum in GMU 448 (Stillaguamish) in Skagit (District 14) and Snohomish (District 13) counties exist on both private and state lands. However, elk densities in these two units are low, and hunting pressure may push elk into adjacent GMUs that remain closed to general harvest. In 2022, four cows and 16 bulls were reported harvested in GMU 407. No elk were reported harvested in GMU 448 during the 2022 season. Hunters seeking public land access opportunities for these general season elk hunts should visit the [WDFW Hunt Regulations Web map](#) for more information.

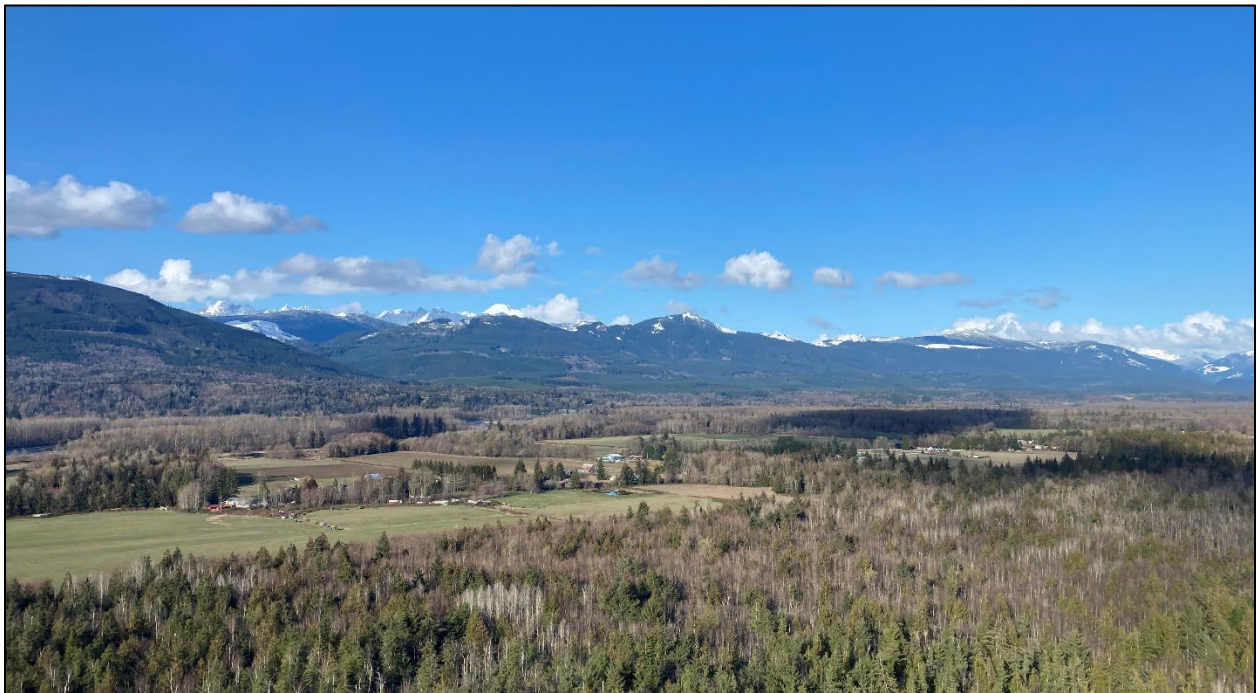


Figure 8. Skagit Valley from a helicopter during the 2023 spring North Cascades Elk Herd population survey
– Photo by Callie B Moore

GMU 407 tends to have greater numbers of elk than GMU 448, but access to private property may be vital to getting a real opportunity. Most elk in GMU 407 occur in and around Acme Valley, with a few elk found west of the South Fork Nooksack River or north of the community of Van Zandt along Highway 9. The public area most likely to yield success for hunters in GMU 407 is the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Van Zandt Dike property northeast of Acme that borders private property in Acme Valley to the east. Though hunting pressure can be high, hunters who scout, do their homework and hunt away from roads are likelier to harvest an animal. When hunting Van Zandt Dike, hunters should know the DNR property boundary and not trespass onto private property without permission or enter GMU 418.

Interested parties can find annual harvest reports and harvest statistics online at [Game Harvest Reports](#). Hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), which provides information on Washington's 2023–2024 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

ELK HOOF DISEASE (TREPONEME BACTERIA)

Reports of elk with deformed, broken, or missing hooves have increased dramatically in southwest Washington since 2008, with sporadic observations in other areas west of the Cascade Range, including within the North Cascades elk herd area. Several conditions can result in limping or hoof deformities. However, research conducted by WDFW and a panel of scientific advisors from 2009–2014 found that hoof abnormalities in this region were strongly associated with treponeme bacteria. This bacterium is known to cause a hoof disease in 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. The disease is currently concentrated in southwestern Washington, where prevalence is highest in Cowlitz, Wahkiakum, and western Lewis County. The disease is less prevalent in elk herds further away from the core affected area, like the North Cascades elk herd in District 14. While many questions remain about the disease, several aspects of TAHD in elk are apparent:

- **Vulnerability:** The disease is highly infectious among elk, but there is no evidence that it affects humans. TAHD can affect any hoof in any elk, including young or old or male or female elk.
- **Hooves only:** Tests show the disease is limited to an elk's hooves and does not affect their meat or organs. If the meat looks normal and hunters practice good hygiene during harvest, processing, and cooking, it is considered safe to eat.
- **No treatment:** There is no vaccine to prevent the disease, nor are there any proven ways to treat it in the field. Similar conditions in livestock have been successfully treated by cleaning and bandaging hooves and giving them foot baths, but this is not a realistic option for free-ranging elk.



Figure 9. A biologist examines an elk hoof with elk hoof disease

How hunters can help:

WDFW has implemented an incentive-based pilot program to encourage westside (400, 500, 600 series GMUs) hunters to harvest limping elk, potentially reducing the prevalence of the disease over time. This program aims to increase the proportion of limping elk in the total harvest rather than increase elk harvest overall. General season or permit hunters can participate in the program by submitting elk hooves at one of the many collection sites in Western Washington. Hunters that submit hooves with signs of TAHD (for example, abnormal hooves) will be entered into a drawing for a special incentive permit for the following license year. Multiple bull permits in Western Washington will be awarded with Sep. 1 – Dec. 31 season dates. Additionally, all participants will receive a waterproof license holder.

So, what can hunters do to help?

- **Harvest a limping elk** from any 400, 500, or 600 series GMUs
- **Turn in your elk hooves** along with complete registration forms at one of several collection sites in Western Washington. In District 14, the collection barrel will be located at the following location:
- **Report elk observations** of affected and unaffected elk on the Department's [online reporting form](#).
- **Clean shoes and tires** after hiking or driving off-road in a known affected area to help minimize the risk of spreading the disease to new areas. Remove all mud from shoes and tires before leaving your hunting site.

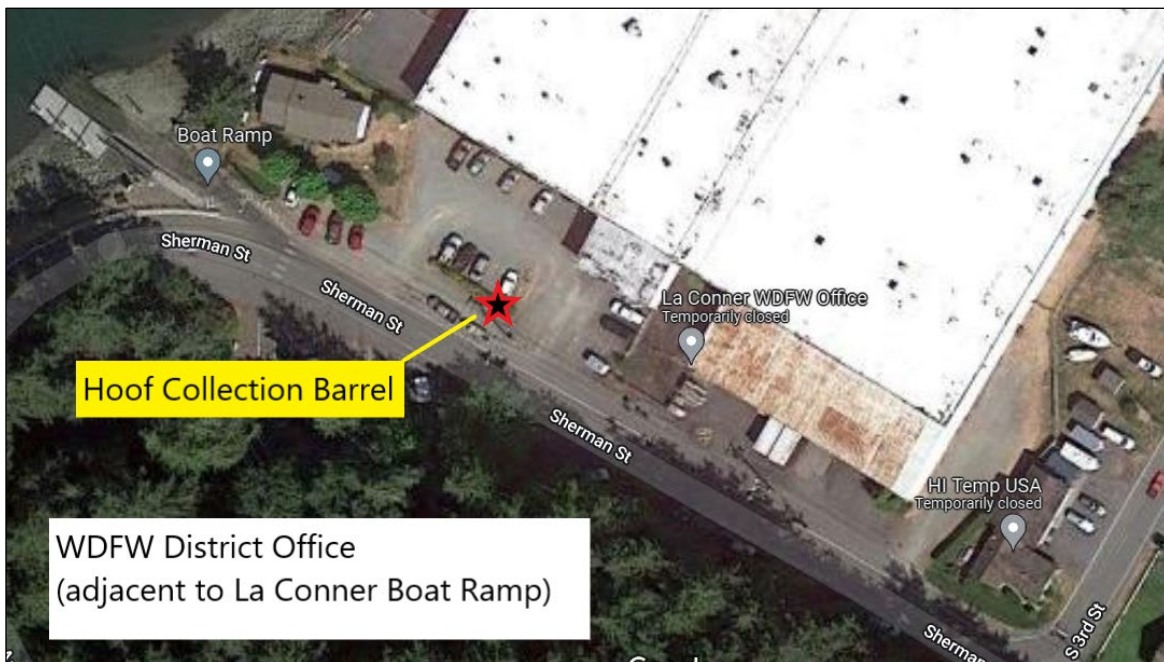


Figure 10. WDFW District Office at 111 Sherman St, La Conner, WA 98257

- WDFW works with scientists, veterinarians, outdoor organizations, Tribal governments, and others to better understand and manage TAHD. For more information about TAHD, visit the [WDFW elk hoof disease webpage](#). Additional details on TAHD and this incentive program can be found on pages 65 and 66 of the [Washington 2023 Big Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet.

DEER

WDFW is not conducting black-tailed deer surveys currently in District 14, primarily due to the difficulty in accurately surveying deer in dense, Western Washington habitats. However, biologist observations and other anecdotal reports support the general notion that black-tailed deer population numbers and densities are down in GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), 437 (Sauk), and 450 (Cascade). In contrast, portions of GMU 407 (North Sound), the most urbanized GMU in the district, have high local deer densities that can cause damage to private properties.



Figure 11. A female black-tailed deer and her fawn feeding in a field in Skagit County – Photo by Brent Moran

Hunters reported 692 harvested deer during the 2022 general season in the primary GMUs within District 14 (GMUs 407, 418, 426, and 437). This harvest number is similar to the 686 deer harvested during the 2021 season. From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 provides the best opportunity to harvest deer successfully in the district. In 2022, 482 deer (83 does and 399 bucks) were harvested in GMU 407 during the general season hunts. Regarding the number of deer harvested, the next best option for hunters is GMU 437, with 142 deer (16 does and 126 bucks) harvested during the 2022 general season. Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found online at [Game Harvest Reports](#).

The drastic difference in harvest rates between GMU 407 and other GMUs within the district is related to the number of hunting days available, deer densities, and ease of access. GMU 407 provides hunting opportunities that the other GMUs do not, and hunters have learned to take advantage of it. Though some public land opportunities exist in GMU 407, the key to a successful harvest in this GMU is securing the appropriate permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area before the hunting season. Hunters who intend to hunt deer in developed areas should review page 90 of the [Washington 2023 Big Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet and check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions.

Modern firearm hunters in District 14 may apply for a permit only quality buck hunt during the late season in GMUs 418, 426, and 437. These quality buck tags provide some of the best opportunities for success among deer hunters in the district and allow hunters a chance to hunt bucks during the rut. Permit hunter success rates during the 2022 season were 12% in GMU 418, 10% in GMU 426, and 20% in GMU 437 for hunters who participated. Sixty tags were issued, and hunters reported harvesting nine bucks for a 15% success rate overall.



Figure 12. A young black-tailed deer – Photo by Stephanie Pelham

WDFW negotiated access to Sierra Pacific properties for six of the 25 permit holders in GMU 418 during the 2022 season and likely will provide the same opportunity for 2023 hunters. Hunters who draw a quality buck tag for GMU 418 will be provided details by mail about how to be included in a lottery-style drawing for one of six available chances to win access to Sierra Pacific properties in the GMU.

For those seeking a more remote and rugged trophy black-tailed deer hunting experience, high elevation areas in the Mt. Baker Wilderness in GMU 418 and Glacier Peak Wilderness in GMU 450 are open for the High Buck Hunt from Sep. 15 – 25. These areas can be accessed by using U.S. Forest Service (USFS) roads and trail systems. Hunters should be prepared for thick and steep terrain and heavy concentrations of hikers and other recreationists during fair weather. Ample scouting is required to determine where deer are concentrated, as well as to avoid crowds. Smaller alpine basins and lightly forested ridges not accessed by main roads and trails can be productive. Visit the following link for more information on [road and trail conditions in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest](#). **Note that the Noisy-Diobsud Wilderness Area is NOT open to the High Buck Hunt.**

Within District 14, some hunting opportunities exist on private industrial timberlands and public property managed by Washington DNR and the USFS. However, some areas may be gated due to timber theft, dumping, vandalism, etc. Many of these gated areas can be accessed on foot or with mountain bikes, allowing those willing to do the work an opportunity to hunt deer that do not receive as much hunting pressure.

Deer hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), which provides information on Washington's 2023–2024 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

ADENOVIRUS HEMORRHAGIC DISEASE

WDFW documented an Adenovirus Hemorrhagic Disease (AHD) outbreak in black-tailed deer in several island GMUs within District 13 and Skagit County in District 14 in 2021. AHD is caused by a viral infection transmitted by direct contact between deer, through bodily fluids, or possibly airborne routes. This makes the virus more likely to spread in areas with high deer concentrations.

The disease was detected on British Columbia's Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island during the fall of 2020 and then on Orcas and San Juan islands during May and June 2021. The disease impacted deer on other islands in the San Juan Archipelago, including Blakely, Henry, Lopez, Shaw, and Stuart Islands. On Whidbey Island, WDFW responded to and investigated the deaths of several deer that displayed symptoms consistent with AHD. The disease was confirmed in Anacortes in Skagit County in July 2021. District 13 and 14 biologists continue to actively monitor for the presence of this disease in any island and mainland deer populations. As of late August 2023, there have been no confirmed cases of AHD this year.

AHD does not pose a risk to livestock, pets, or people through contact with or by consuming the meat. However, disposable gloves are always recommended for handling any wildlife carcass. To reduce the risk of spreading AHD to new areas, hunters should avoid harvesting AHD-infected deer in AHD-impacted areas. Hunters should note that AHD symptoms in deer include rapid or open-mouth breathing, foaming or drooling at the mouth, diarrhea (sometimes bloody), weakness, and emaciation. This disease is fast acting, so a deer that dies from this virus does so within three to five days of contracting it.

If you see a deer displaying any of these symptoms, please report the location of the sighting on the [WDFW Sick, Injured, or Dead Wildlife reporting page](#). Please visit the WDFW Adenovirus Hemorrhagic Disease (AHD) webpage for more information on AHD.

BEAR

Black bears live in diverse forested habitats throughout the state, from coastal rainforests to the dry woodlands of the Cascades' eastern slopes. In general, black bears are strongly associated with forest cover, but they occasionally use relatively open country, such as clear-cuts and the fringes of other open habitats.



Figure 13. A black bear captured on a WDFW trail camera in Skagit County.

Black bears are common in District 14, though formal estimates of the population in this district were unavailable until recently. In 2021, WDFW biologists conducted a population monitoring effort in GMU 418 (Whatcom County) to obtain a more accurate population density estimate for this area. Using hair snare "corrals (Figure 14), biologists collected more than 1,300 hair samples from 92 individual bears (52 females and 40 males). They obtained an estimate of 28 bears/100 km² (i.e., 28 bears/39 mi²) in GMU 418. In addition, hunter harvest reports and age data obtained from premolar teeth submitted by successful hunters are used to determine age and sex ratios and infer population size and trends. This information helps WDFW set bear harvest guidelines.

Hunters harvested 168 bears during the fall 2022 hunt in GMUs 407, 418, 426, and 437. This is an increase from the 123 bears harvested during the 2021 season. Hunters experienced a 14% overall success rate in the four GMUs, and more than 50% of the harvest occurred in GMU 418.

District 14 hunters that choose to hunt in GMUs 418 and 426 will be hunting in a grizzly bear recovery area identified by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC). This federal/state working group includes WDFW.

Before hunting, bear hunters must pass the annual WDFW [online bear identification exam](#) with a score of 80% or higher. Proof of successful exam completion or an equivalent test from another state must always be on your person when afield.

Opportunities for harvesting a black bear in District 14 have more to do with access and berry production than does the previous year's harvest. Road access behind gates is available by walking or mountain bike, with abundant younger age class clear cuts that attract bears. Hunters willing to pursue bears during the early season at higher elevations can hunt in classic alpine environments where bears forage on abundant huckleberries, increasing the potential for spot and stalk opportunities.



Figure 14. One of the hair snare corrals used during the 2021 bear density estimation study in GMU 418.

The WDFW Private Lands Access Program has partnered with Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) to facilitate vehicle access to a section of SPI lands on a reservation basis during August 2023 for bear hunting. This limited-entry section is nearly 15,000 acres and stretches from Highway 542 to the U.S. – Canada border. To reserve your spot, visit the WDFW [Hunt by Reservation](#) webpage and search for Black Mountain. Hunters must make a reservation for each date they hunt the property and for each party member. Fifty (50) reservation permits are available daily. The continuation of this opportunity depends on each hunter's understanding and following all access rules.



Figure 15. A black bear walks down a Forest Service road in the spring – Photo by Douglas Boze

All successful fall black bear hunters statewide MUST submit a black bear premolar tooth per WAC 220-415-090 to the Department within five (5) days of harvest or by Dec. 1, 2023. The premolar tooth is located behind the canine tooth of the upper jaw. Tooth envelopes are available at all WDFW offices.

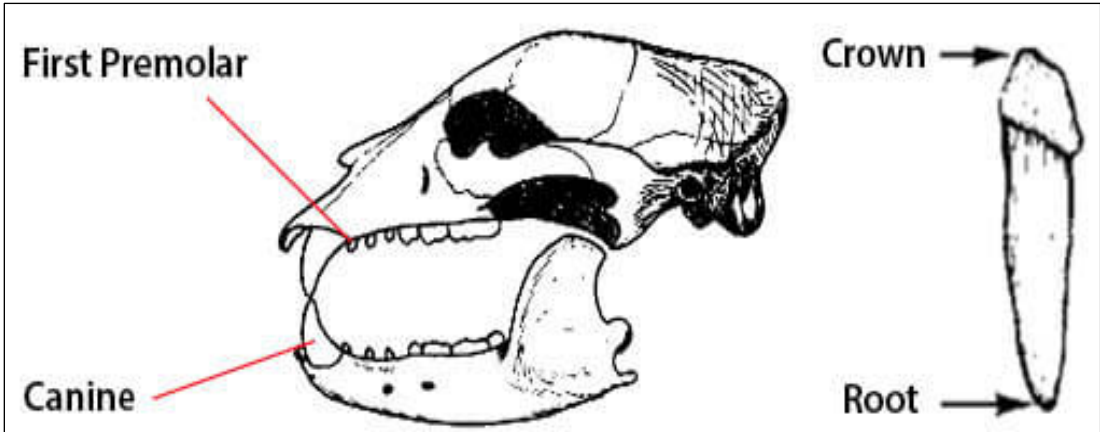


Figure 16. Location of a black bear’s first premolar for required tooth submission to WDFW

Bear hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), which provides information on Washington's 2023–2024 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

COUGAR

Cougar hunting opportunities in District 14 are opportunistic, with most cougars harvested by hunters that happen upon them while pursuing other game animals. The primary prey for cougars in the district is black-tailed deer, so hunters who spend time in areas with more deer will increase their chances of seeing and harvesting a cougar.

A hunter who wishes to harvest a cougar must possess a valid big game license, including the cougar species option, before harvesting a cat. The use of dogs to recreationally pursue and harvest cougars is illegal statewide. Hunters may harvest cougars during the early (Sep. 1 – Dec. 31) and late (Jan. 1 – April 30) season.

Hunters should note that most GMUs in District 14, except for GMU 407, are restricted by a cougar harvest guideline. GMUs 418, 426, and 437 have a harvest restriction of 10–13 animals, while a total harvest of 8-11 animals is permitted in GMUs 448 and 450. In these restricted cougar harvest GMUs, WDFW can close the late hunting season after Jan. 1, 2024, if they meet or exceed management threshold guidelines. During the late season, cougar hunters may hunt from Jan. 1 until the hunt area harvest guideline has been met or until the end of the season on April 30, whichever occurs first. The hunter is responsible for verifying if the cougar late hunting season is open or closed by calling the toll-free cougar hunting hotline (1-866-364-4868) or visiting the WDFW webpage for [Cougar Hunting Area Openings and Closures](#). The hotline and webpage will be updated weekly beginning Jan. 1, 2024. During the 2022–23 season, the cougar harvest did not exceed management threshold guidelines in any District 14 GMU, and it remained open until the mandatory closure date.

Hunters should remember that a 2023 hunting license is valid from April 1, 2023 – March 31, 2024. Thus, a hunter wishing to harvest a cougar in April 2024 must purchase a 2024–2025 hunting license/cougar tag (WAC 220-415-100). Additionally, all successful cougar hunters must report cougar harvest to the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) within 72 hours of harvest and contact a WDFW office to arrange to have the pelt sealed within five (5) days of the notification of kill. Hunters must also report their harvest in the [WDFW Wild System](#).

Cougar hunters in District 14 are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Hunt Planner Web map](#), which provides information on Washington's 2023–2024 hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more.

MOUNTAIN GOAT

The Mount Baker area has one of the largest concentrations of mountain goats in Washington. Mountain goat hunting in this state is a once-in-a-lifetime harvest opportunity and a limited-entry tag only a few lucky individuals draw in any year.

Drawing a goat tag is a commitment to spend a fair amount of time in rugged, high-elevation terrain that can be as treacherous as it is awe-inspiring. To increase the success and enjoyment of the hunt, hunters should anticipate spending time researching online and scouting the unit in person before the season opener. This hunt is physically and mentally challenging, so prospective hunters are encouraged to determine if they are up to the challenge before applying for a permit.

In 2023, six special permits were issued for the three mountain goat hunt areas in District 14: Chowder Ridge, Lincoln Peak, and Avalanche Gorge. A single tag holder will have exclusive access to the Chowder Ridge hunt area north of Mount Baker. The remaining five permit holders (two in Lincoln Peak and three in the Avalanche Gorge hunt units) may share these units with the winners of the statewide auction and raffle permits. Permit holders can legally harvest a female mountain goat (nanny), however WDFW and most state wildlife agencies **strongly** encourage hunters avoid it. This is because the species is slow to reach sexual maturity (three years) and has a slow production rate (does not bear young every year). This leads to the population's health relying heavily on the number of mature females in a population because they have a better chance of producing young that will survive. Thus, mountain goat populations are very sensitive to the harvest of nannies. Mountain goat hunt applicants drawn for a permit can only purchase their license after completing the WDFW online mountain goat gender identification training., hunters who draw a permit must review provided educational material and make all efforts to harvest a male (billy).

Harvest success rates for the three Mt. Baker hunt areas are generally 50% or greater in any year, and has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. During the 2022 season, hunters harvested one female in Chowder Ridge and one male in Lincoln Peak for an overall success rate of 33%.



Figure 17. Hunter with his Mt. Baker goat – Photo by Clint Easley/Shane Vander Giessen



Figure 18. Two mountain goats in the North Cascades - Photo by Greg Green

A hunter who kills a mountain goat in Washington must present the head with horns attached for inspection within ten days of harvest to a WDFW Regional or District office or a location designated by a WDFW representative. Call a WDFW Regional or District office to schedule an appointment with a biologist for inspection. After inspection, hunters may keep the head/horns of a lawfully harvested mountain goat in Washington for personal use.

Heavy precipitation since November 2021 has caused washouts and other travel issues on some U.S. Forest Service (USFS) roads and trails in District 14. Hunters are encouraged to reference the following interactive map from USFS to get the status of roads and trails within each goat hunt unit before your hunt begins: [Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie NF Road and Trail Conditions.](#)

UPLAND BIRDS

Upland bird opportunities available to hunters within District 14 include WDFW-released ring-neck pheasant on designated release sites, sooty grouse, ruffed grouse, California quail, band-tailed pigeons, mourning doves, and an ever-growing population of Eurasian collared-doves. Although some of these species are quite similar, each offers a unique opportunity to hunters throughout the state. For more general information on upland bird hunting in Washington, follow these links for a summary of [upland bird seasons](#), find ideas for [where to go upland bird hunting](#), and find information on [the basics of upland bird hunting in Washington](#).

PHEASANT

The [pheasant release program](#) in Western Washington provides upland bird hunting opportunities in areas that cannot sustain naturally reproducing populations due to our cool, wet climate and lack of grain farming. This program encourages participation from new, young, and seasoned hunters. Approximately 35,000 to 40,000 pheasants are released yearly at 27 sites throughout Western Washington. Pheasant releases will occur at three sites in District 14 this fall.

Whatcom County has two pheasant release sites, one at the WDFW Lake Terrell Wildlife Area and the other at the adjacent Alcoa Intalco Works. Volunteer members perform releases on Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday of each week during the season, with approximately 300 birds released each week between the two sites.

The third site in District 14 is in Skagit County at the Samish Unit. Releases will occur once before the youth hunt and the other before the senior hunt. No further releases will occur after this. However, hunters may pursue the remaining on-site pheasants until the opening of the statewide waterfowl season (Oct. 14; see page 20 of the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet). This site is closed after this date to minimize conflicts between pheasant and waterfowl hunters since the unit is managed and used primarily for waterfowl hunting.

To hunt at these sites in District 14 or other pheasant release sites in Western Washington, hunters must purchase a Western Washington pheasant license, but a small game license is not required to participate.

Additional requirements to hunt pheasants and other upland birds include:

- Must wear a minimum of 400 square inches of hunter orange or fluorescent hunter pink clothing
- Use and carry only non-toxic shot for all upland bird hunting on all pheasant release sites statewide

Please refer to the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet and [WDFW's Pheasant Hunting webpage](#) for more detailed information.

FOREST GROUSE

Ruffed and sooty (blue) grouse are found on public and private forest lands throughout District 14. Ruffed grouse are the most widespread grouse species in the district and statewide. They are most abundant in lowland secondary succession coniferous and deciduous forests under 2,000 feet of elevation. Therefore, hunters after sooty grouse should seek higher elevation sites along trails and ridgelines above 2,000–3,000 feet within Pacific silver fir and noble fir forest stands. Also, areas with berry-bearing plants like huckleberry and grouse whortleberry should be sought when hunting this species. To find more information, check out the [hunting forest grouse](#) page.

During the 2021-2023 season setting rulemaking process, the WDFW Commission adopted a decision to delay the forest grouse season two weeks from the original opening date of Sep. 1 to the new season dates of **Sep. 15 – Jan. 15**. The rule was recommended by WDFW biologists based on harvest data and catch-per-unit effort, indicating that Washington's forest grouse populations are declining. Setting the season back to Sep. 15 helps protect brood hens that are more vulnerable to harvest during early September. More information is [available in this 2021 blog post](#).



Figure 19. A male ruffed grouse along a road – Photo by Michael Schroeder

During the 2021 hunting season, hunters reported successfully harvesting 1,795 grouse in Skagit County and 1,027 in Whatcom County. The reported harvest decreased by 18% in Skagit County compared to the five-year long-term average, probably due to a 14% decrease in reported hunter participation and the later season start date. However, in Whatcom County, the reported harvest increased by 8% based on the same long-term average, despite a slight decrease (1%) in reported hunter participation. For the 2023 season, hunters should expect reliable hunting conditions when effort and time are put forth.

WDFW Forest Grouse Wing & Tail Collection

Biologists collect wings and tails of hunter-harvested forest grouse throughout the season using designated collection sites. This collection effort contributes to a long-term statewide dataset that allows for a better evaluation of population trends and age-ratio data necessary for the local management of forest grouse species. Grouse hunters in District 14 can help with this effort by depositing one wing and the tail of each grouse they harvest into one of our collection barrels located statewide ([WDFW forest grouse wing and tail collection sites](#)). In District 14, collection sites are at the following locations:

- Whatcom County - SE corner of the Welcome Grocery Store building (5565 Mt Baker Hwy, Deming, WA)
- Skagit County – Cascade Mercantile (31387 SR 20, Lyman, WA)

Please be sure to use the provided bags at the site and to fill out all necessary information. If these locations are inconvenient for hunters, we suggest looking through the statewide wing barrel site list on our website's [Forest grouse wing and tail collection](#) webpage or calling your local, [regional office](#) for information.

DOVE: MOURNING & EURASIAN COLLARED

To hunt mourning doves, hunters must possess a small game license and a state migratory bird permit. The season runs from Sep. 1 – Oct. 30, with a daily bag limit of 15 and a possession limit of 45. Dove harvest in District 14 is low, with a little more than 400 birds harvested in Skagit County and a little more than 100 birds harvested in Whatcom County during the 2021 season. To maximize success, we recommend that hunters take the time to scout cut grain fields that will attract doves.

While hunting mourning doves, hunters can harvest an infinite number of Eurasian collared-doves because they are a non-native species. Hunters can also pursue this species year-round because of its non-native status. In contrast to mourning doves, this species tends to occupy more developed areas. Therefore, we recommend that hunters take the time to properly scout and acquire landowner permission in lowland agricultural areas with barnyard settings.



Figure 20. Comparison between a mourning and Eurasian collared dove

Hunters should take the time to learn how to correctly identify Eurasian collared doves from mourning doves on the ground and in flight, as they can often be challenging to identify on the wing by inexperienced birders/hunters. Eurasian collared doves are much larger than mourning doves, but size can be difficult to gauge when only one species is present. Aside from the diagnostic black collar on the backs of their necks and overall lighter color, they also have a squared tail, while mourning doves have a pointed tail. Identification is especially crucial when hunting Eurasian collared doves outside the mourning dove season to prevent the accidental take of a species out of season.

Hunting Eurasian collared doves requires only a small or big game license. As for all hunting activities, hunters should confirm that the area they plan to pursue has no firearm restrictions and be mindful of people, buildings, farm equipment, or power lines while hunting.

BAND-TAILED PIGEON

Band-tailed pigeons are the largest of Washington's pigeons and doves and are native to the state. Harvest trends for this species have been declining for some time. The decline is likely linked to decreases in hunter interest and participation. Hunting this species requires more tact than hunting other species in the pigeon/dove family. Finding areas that birds pass over, the sites they use for grit, and any mineral springs can increase success. They have a fruit and seed diet and are fond of elderberries, cherries, and other fruiting trees. Finding where they feed and pass, shooting as they enter and leave a site is a commonly used tactic.

Another solid hunting strategy is to target managed forest lands with mixed stand age classes that provide feeding areas with adjacent roosting areas. Additionally, band-tails are more challenging to bring down than mourning and Eurasian collared doves, so staying hidden and reducing your movement when hunting is essential to getting them in range and getting a good shot.



Figure 21. Adult band-tailed pigeon in a bird bath – Photo by Creative Commons

District biologists perform mineral site surveys annually in mid-July at historic mineral sites throughout the state. In District 14, two sites are actively monitored, one in Whatcom and the other in Skagit. Biologists use these surveys to monitor changes in the local breeding population, allowing them to anticipate trends in the regional population. However, the open season (Sep. 17–25) usually corresponds with fall migration, when northern birds move into this area. Making predictions about the quality of the hunting season for this species is difficult without an analysis of flyway-wide survey results, which takes time and isn't released before the hunting season.

A small game license, state migratory bird permit, and migratory bird authorization card with band-tailed pigeon harvest report card are required. The daily limit is two (2) birds with a six (6) bird possession limit. The mandatory harvest reporting deadline for this species is Sep. 30, 2023.

WATERFOWL

IMPORTANT REGULATIONS IN THE 2023–24 SEASON

- **Harlequin Duck remains CLOSED** to harvest statewide.
- **Electronic calls are allowed** during white-goose only season segments in GMA 1 (Feb. 10-20, 2024)

SPECIAL HUNTING DATES

YOUTH HUNT - Open species include Canada geese, white-fronted geese, ducks (including scaup), and coots. white geese, brant, and snipe are not open during this hunt. Youth hunts will be held in Western Washington on Sep. 24, 2023. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt. Please refer to page 26 of the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet. The youth hunt is open to hunters under 16 years of age (must be accompanied by an adult at least 18 years old who is not hunting).

COMBINED YOUTH, VETERANS & ACTIVE MILITARY HUNT - Open species include Canada geese, white-fronted geese, white geese, brant, ducks (including scaup), and coots. These hunts will be held statewide on Feb. 3, 2024. Authorization and Harvest Record Cards are required for certain species during this hunt. Veterans and Active Military are individuals who have served in the active military, naval, or air service and those discharged or released under Honorable conditions. The active-duty military also includes National Guard and Reserves members on active duty (other than for training). During the hunt, these hunters must have one of the following on their person (a copy is sufficient): DD214, Veteran Benefit Card, Retired Active Military I.D., or Active-Duty I.D. card. Please refer to pages 21 and 27 of the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet for bag limit details for this hunt.

DABBLING DUCKS

The Washington Breeding Waterfowl Population Survey is conducted yearly and is an index of breeding abundance since all areas of the state cannot be sampled. This year's survey was conducted April 24 – April 27 in Western Washington. The district falls within the North Puget Lowlands survey area.

Statewide spring precipitation values in 2023 were generally drier than average but were not as dry as last year. A third of the North Puget Lowlands were classified as being abnormally dry. April brought enough rainfall to form widespread areas of standing water during the survey period but may have occurred too late to increase nesting success. The statewide population estimate of all ducks was 7% less than the 2022 survey but 4% higher than the long-term average. The 2023 Western Washington estimate of 97,823 was the highest since the survey began in 2010. Numbers were 14% higher than in 2022 and +53% higher than the long-term average. This was the first year that Western Washington had a higher mallard estimate than Eastern Washington. One factor contributing to the high mallard estimate in Western Washington was the high number of grouped mallards. In 2023, grouped mallards comprised 27% of the statewide BPI compared to 8% in 2022, a more typical year.

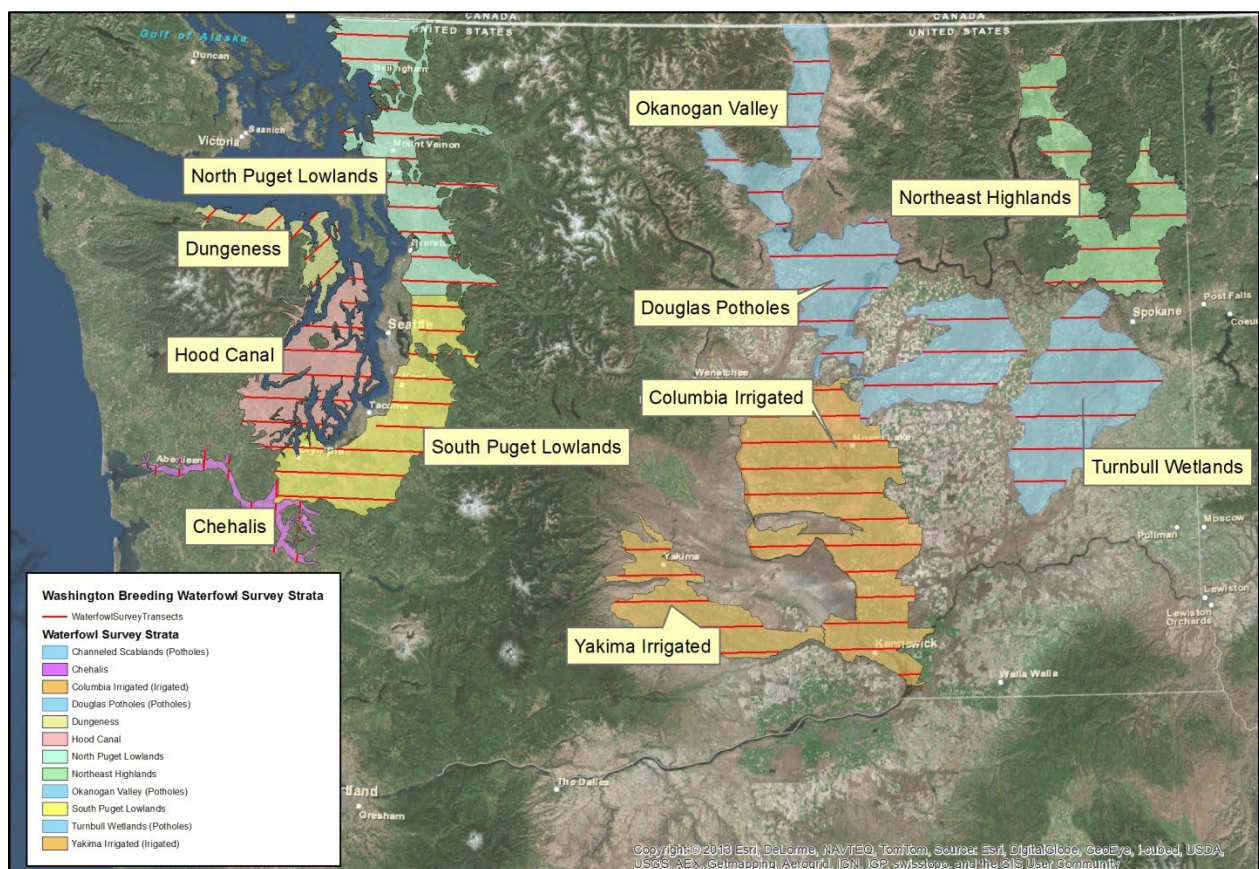


Figure 22. Washington State breeding waterfowl strata and long-term Breeding Waterfowl Population Survey transects.

Based on 10-year average data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual [National Migratory Bird Harvest Survey](#), Skagit County boasts the second-best harvest in the state and 36th out of the 3,115 surveyed U.S. counties. During the same time, Whatcom County ranked a respectable 7th in the state and 137th nationwide for duck harvest. During last season, Skagit County remained the state's second-best duck harvest county (following Grant County), with a harvest of 49,770, which is ~9% higher than the five-year average but 1% lower than last year. Determining the factors that influenced this slight decline in harvest is difficult. However, extremely wet conditions in most of November and the continual resumption of more regular life schedules after the Covid-19 pandemic are thought to have played a role. The Whatcom County harvest was 24,409, up 7% from the five-year average, but was 12% lower than the previous season.

Hunters have several resources to help them get started if they want to hunt waterfowl in District 14. If you are new to hunting waterfowl, please visit the WDFW webpage [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting](#) for an excellent introduction. Hunters are encouraged to visit the WDFW [Waterfowl Quality Hunt Program](#) webpage and [Hunt Planner Web map](#). The web map is a tool that provides information on Washington's hunting regulations and hunts based on location, date, weapon choice, and more. Additionally, the web map provides layers showing public and private land hunting opportunities, GMU boundaries, roads, topographical features, and county lines. Be sure to check with the appropriate landowner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

Another resource for those planning to hunt the popular Skagit Wildlife Area and its many units productive for waterfowl hunting is the [WDFW Skagit Wildlife Area Hunting Guide](#).

The national waterfowl breeding population survey was resumed in the spring of 2022 after a two-year hiatus because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This year was one of the latest springs across most of North America and had abundant precipitation. This resulted in optimal to excellent duck breeding conditions in the west and mid-continent flyways, producing the waterfowl that winter in Washington. This should result in average to above-average recruitment, increasing hunter success during the upcoming season.

Early-season hunting opportunities in District 14 are generally more successful in saltwater marshes. On opening day, hunters can expect a mixed bag of species, including the less common blue-winged teal and wood duck, since they do not leave for their southern wintering grounds until later in the season. Then, large numbers of northern breeding ducks start to arrive in late October and November when colder weather pushes them south.

The bag limit for northern pintail is a one-bird daily limit. This change was made for the 2020-21 season because population estimates fell below federal management thresholds and have yet to rebound. Although this district supports a large northern pintail population, this is not typical in many other areas of the country and therefore does not accurately reflect the species' population status across North America.

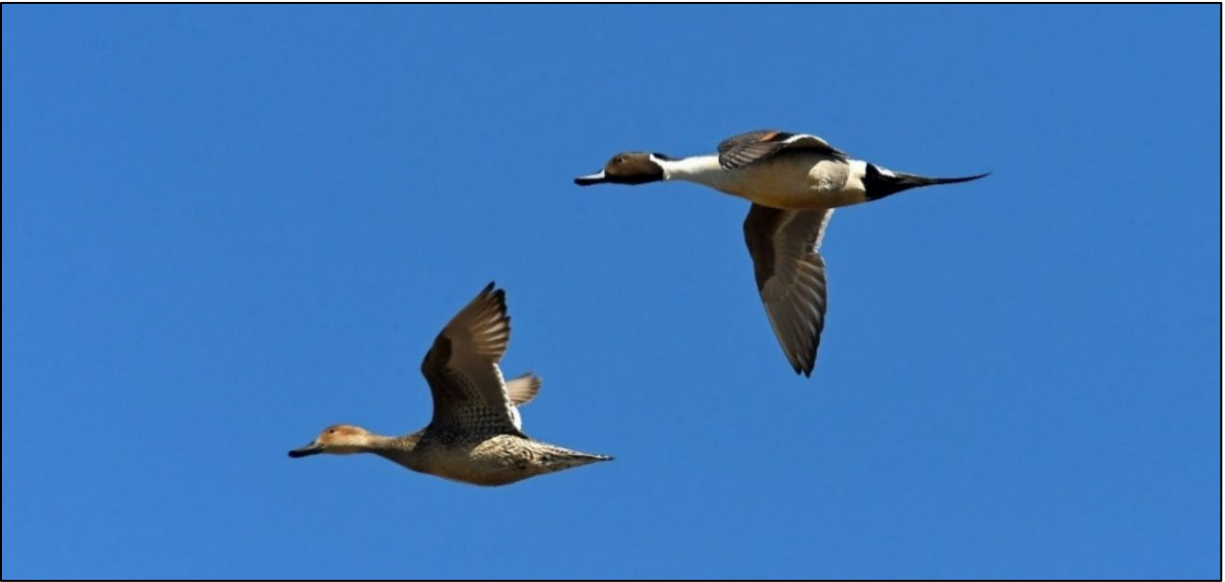


Figure 23. A northern pintail pair midflight on a clear day at the Island Unit – Photo by Alan Bauer

This year's general season will run from Oct. 14–22 and Oct. 25, 2023–Jan. 23, 2024, except for scaup, which is open from Nov. 4 – Jan. 28, 2023. Bag limits are restricted to seven (7) ducks. The species-specific daily bag restrictions mean a hunter cannot harvest more than two (2) hen mallard, one (1) pintail, two (2) scaup (when open), two (2) canvasback, and two (2) redhead statewide. For sea ducks in District 14, bag limits should not include more than two (2) scoters, two (2) long-tailed ducks, and two (2) goldeneyes. For more details, refer to page 19 in the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet. Please acquire all the appropriate authorizations and harvest record cards for the species/areas you are pursuing. Refer to the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet for more information. In addition, authorizations and harvest record cards are available at WDFW license dealers or online using [WDFW's Wild System](#). Hunters are responsible for selecting each harvest record card for the species they intend to hunt.

Mandatory Bird Authorizations & Harvest Record Cards

MANDATORY HARVEST REPORTING DEADLINES:

Band-tailed Pigeon
September 30, 2023
Sea Duck, SW Canada Goose,
Snow Goose (GMA1), Brant
March 20, 2024

To improve management of certain limited migratory bird species, you are required to possess a Migratory Bird Authorization and Harvest Record Card(s) if you are hunting those species (see page 11).

Immediately after taking a band-tailed pigeon, brant, sea duck (scoters, long-tailed duck, goldeneyes) in western Washington, snow goose (Goose Management Area 1) or any goose in Goose Management Area 2 — Coast & Inland into possession, you must fill out the required harvest record card information in ink within the designated spaces provided.

You must report hunting activity on your harvest record cards to WDFW using the online reporting system at: <https://fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov/login>, or by mailing the cards to:

WDFW, Wildlife Program — Waterfowl Section, PO Box 43141 Olympia, WA 98504.

Reports need to be postmarked by the reporting deadlines even if you did not harvest any birds. Please note that you must comply with these reporting requirements or you will be required to pay a \$10 administrative fee before obtaining a harvest record card the next year.

Figure 24. Mandatory harvest reporting for sea ducks

SEA DUCKS

When pursuing intertidal and saltwater areas for sea ducks and diving ducks in Skagit County, hunters can use public boat ramps in Conway, the Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters Unit on Freshwater Slough, or under the twin bridges that cross over the Swinomish Channel on Highway 20. In Whatcom County, public boat ramps are available at most harbors, including Blaine, Squalicum, and Fairhaven. Birch Bay State Park is another popular access point for sea ducks and brant hunting. Boat access can significantly improve hunting options and success, but caution and preparation for a successful, enjoyable, and safe hunt are imperative.

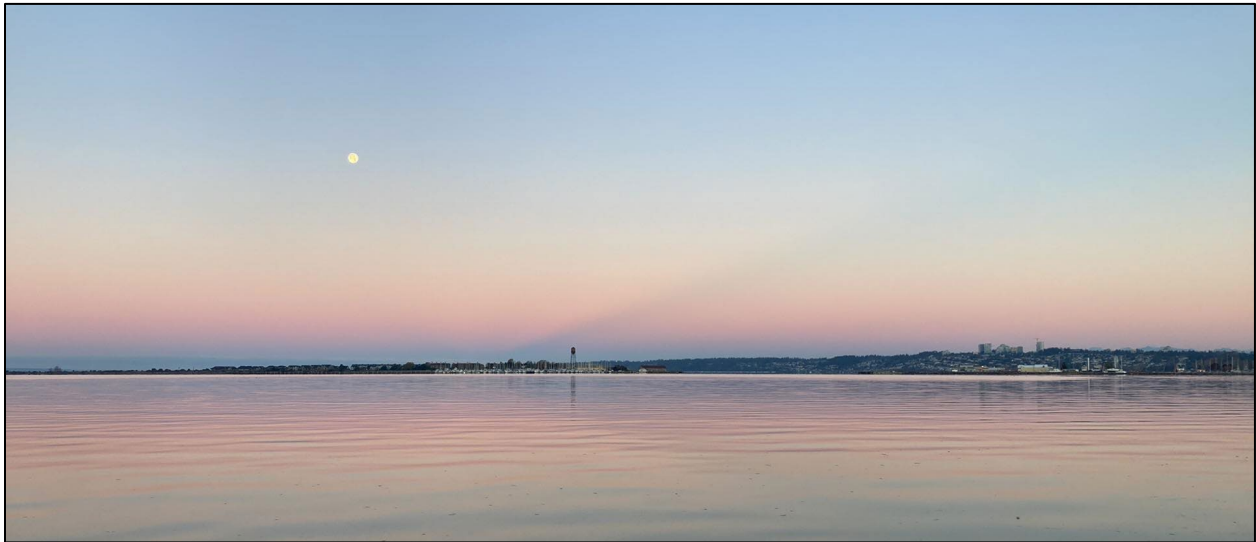


Figure 25. Bellingham Bay at sunrise in November 2022 during scoter capture project – Photo by Callie Moore

PACIFIC BRANT

Skagit County has a historic and well-known tradition of Pacific brant (including black brant) hunting. Brant wintering in Padilla and Samish bays mainly belong to the sub-species referred to as western high arctic brant, also known as grey-bellies. This sub-species nests in a small area in the western Canadian high arctic and is vulnerable to excessive harvest because of their limited nesting and wintering grounds. Historically, open season dates have been determined by aerial surveys to prevent overharvest. The survey is flown to determine a wintering population estimate and is then compared to current management thresholds established by the agency. In previous years, the estimate dictated whether there was a six-day season (if surveyors counted more than 6,000 birds), a three-day season (between 3,000 – 6,000 birds), or no season at all (under 3,000 birds).

In 2019, the agency established a guaranteed two-day season for Skagit County to make it more predictable for hunters. In the 2020 season, this strategy was used again, but the dates were split to optimize the potential for favorable weather. This brant season setting structure was used until this season, when the status of the season will, again, be determined by the winter survey results. This change was made because the 3-year population average for this survey is below the 3,000 bird management threshold. The survey is flown in late December-early January to provide biologists with the data necessary to determine if any harvest would be sustainable for the population. Survey results and possible season dates will be provided via a WDFW news [release](#). Hunters can subscribe to the [WDFW email list](#) to receive news releases and other Department information.



Figure 26. Brant loafing on a gravel bar in Puget Sound – Photo by Ryan Askren

In Whatcom County, the population is primarily made up of black brant, a more abundant and less vulnerable population to overharvest than grey-bellies. Clallam County exhibits similar subspecies patterns; thus, the two counties have been grouped for brant management. The guaranteed season dates for these two counties are Jan. 20, 24, and 27.

Like last year, only Whatcom County will be opened for brant hunting on the special Youth, Veterans, and Active Military hunt day on Feb. 3, 2024. Whether Skagit County is open for brant harvest on this day will be determined by aerial survey results, like the regular brant season. A special migratory bird authorization card is required to hunt brant during the general and special seasons. Lastly, the mandatory harvest reporting deadline for brant is March 20, 2024. Data obtained from these reports are essential for managing this species.

Location and strategy are vital for successful brant hunting. These birds will congregate in feedings areas where eelgrass is exposed at low tide, often near estuaries, spits, and mudflats, then head to open water nearby to "loaf" during high tide or after being pressured. Depending on the location, successful hunters use layout blinds, small boats, kayaks, and various decoy configurations, including long lines, to intercept these iconic geese during their daily routine.

CANADA GEESE

Skagit County consistently boasts the second-highest overall Canada goose harvest in Washington after Grant County. Skagit County goose harvest was 34% more than Grant County. Last season, hunters reported harvesting 1022 birds during the early goose season and 6161 during the regular season, making up almost 5% of the statewide harvest. While Whatcom County ranks 6th with 540 during the early season and 2920 during the regular season. Cumulatively, the district accounts for around 7% of the statewide Canada goose harvest.

This year, the early Canada goose season will occur Sep. 2–7, 2023, and offers early season hunting opportunities for hunters in Goose Management Area 1, which covers both Skagit and Whatcom. Please refer to page 26 of the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet for more detailed information about Goose Management Areas. During this early season, bag limits are set at five (5) birds per day, with a possession limit of 15. Higher limits are in place because early seasons target and decrease the population of resident birds, while later seasons see an influx of migrating geese.

This season's Western Washington Youth hunting date is Sep. 23, 2023. Hunters under 16 can harvest Canada geese or white-fronted geese during this hunt, with a bag limit of four (4) for Canada geese and ten (10) for white-fronted geese. The regular open season occurs from Oct. 14–Nov. 26 and Dec. 9–Jan. 28. Possession bag limits are four (4) per day, with a possession limit of 12. The **mandatory** harvest reporting deadline for Canada geese harvested in Washington is March 20, 2024.

LESSER SNOW GEESE

Snow goose hunting is another mainstay of waterfowl hunting in District 14. It provides a very different alternative to hunting dabbling ducks. Whatcom County was added to Goose Management Area (GMA) 1 during the 2020-21 season. This change was made because the population is healthy and stable, which is evaluated using data collected on the breeding grounds and during winter aerial surveys of the Skagit-Fraser River Delta. These regulations will continue for the 2023-24 season. so hunters in Skagit and Whatcom have a liberal bag limit of 10 white geese per day and a 30-bird possession limit.

The winter Skagit-Fraser River Delta snow goose aerial population survey was flown at the end of February 2023. The count was approximately 30,000 lower than in 2022. This was greatly affected by a widespread avian influenza outbreak that started in November 2022. The outbreak caused substantial mortality, and based on mortality clean-up efforts, juvenile birds seemed to be especially vulnerable. If the productivity on Wrangel Island, Russia, is good, hunters can expect the population to be similar to or slightly less than the population that arrived in the fall of 2022. Should conditions on the breeding grounds result in poor productivity, a slight to medium population decrease is expected.

Hunters interested in harvesting snow geese should seek access to multiple properties before the season. The early season is the best time to lure geese, particularly juveniles, with decoys. In this area, flocks stay within a several-mile home range but do not necessarily return to the same field they were feeding in the previous day. Due to their large numbers and aggressive feeding, the species exhaust a food source quickly. Hunting in corn stubble is a widespread technique at the beginning of the hunting season. As the season progresses, snow goose diets diversify, and geese begin to feed in a variety of crop fields, including winter wheat, hay or silage, and potatoes. Snow geese are most abundant on public and private land on Fir Island in District 14. However, geese do spend time in areas on either side of Interstate 5, north of Burlington and in the Edison area. Snow geese routinely rest on saltwater bays throughout District 14. Flocks fly low enough during severe weather, opening up opportunities for pass shooting on various public and private lands and waters. For ethical reasons, hunters should avoid wounding or failing to retrieve waterfowl.



Figure 27. A flock of snow geese erupting from a field in Skagit Valley – Photo by Callie Moore

No changes have been made to this year's season structure for white geese (lesser snow, Ross', and blue geese) in GMA 1, which covers the entire district. The 2023–24 season will continue to include a late hunting season for white goose only from Feb. 10–20, 2024. One closure will be observed during the season from Nov. 27 – Dec. 8 to allow for the February hunt. Electronic calls will **ONLY** be permitted during the white-geese-only season in GMA 1 from Feb. 10-20. Electronic calls are not permitted during any other open goose season.

Hunters will need a federal migratory bird stamp (if over 16 years of age), a small game license, a state migratory bird permit, and a special migratory bird authorization with GMA 1 snow goose harvest record card. You must [report hunting activity](#) on your harvest record cards to WDFW using the online reporting system or by mailing the cards to WDFW, Wildlife Program — Waterfowl Section, PO Box 43141 Olympia, WA 98504. The deadline for submission is March 20, 2024.

Submission of harvest record cards is mandatory for hunters that request them, **even if you did not harvest birds**. These reports must be postmarked by the reporting deadline to avoid penalties. You must comply with these reporting requirements to avoid a \$10 administrative fee before obtaining a harvest record card next season. The deadline is strictly enforced because WDFW must collate the data, develop preliminary reports, and provide the information to department biologists across the state to set permit levels for the coming hunting season.



Figure 28. A flock of snow geese using a Waterfowl Habitat and Access Program site – Photo by Rob Wingard

Hunters should note that many WDFW-managed lands and National Wildlife Refuges are closed to goose hunting during this late-season opportunity (refer to page 26 in the [Washington 2023 Game Bird and Small Game Hunting Regulations](#) pamphlet). All standard regulations regarding plugged shotguns, non-motorized decoys, and bag limits apply during both seasons. The bag limit for the late white geese season is 20 birds, with a possession limit of 60.

Whatcom and Skagit counties hold certain waterfowl species that could be confused with snow geese. Several thousand trumpeters and tundra swans reside throughout western parts of District 14 from mid-fall through spring. Waterfowl hunters must be able to distinguish between mature or juvenile swans and their snow goose counterparts, which can be a challenge for inexperienced hunters. With proper species identification and patience, there should be little confusion between the species. Hunters should review waterfowl identification materials to sharpen their skills before the season begins. Under state and federal laws, harming swans in Washington State is illegal. Emperor geese have been documented infrequently in District 14. They, too, are closed to harvest in the lower 48 states under federal migratory bird regulations.



Figure 29. Differentiating swans from snow geese

HUNTER ACCESS

Access to private lands for big game hunting opportunities remains limited. Because of experience with theft, vandalism, dumping, and other problems, private industrial timber companies generally do not allow vehicular access. Many timber companies limit public access to walk-in opportunities only, while some do not allow access. Less hunting pressure on these walk-in-only sites results in good hunting opportunities for those willing to use bicycles or hike behind locked gates when private companies allow this type of access.

One exception is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns significant private industrial timberlands in Skagit and Whatcom counties. For the 2023–24 season, WDFW has facilitated access on Sierra Pacific properties in GMU 418 for special permit bull elk, some quality black-tailed buck permit holders, and fall general season bear hunters at a designated site near Black Mountain (under the Hunt by Reservation system).

Weyerhaeuser-Columbia Timberlands Corporation (Weyerhaeuser) sold properties throughout northwest Washington to Hampton Lumber. You can purchase a permit for motorized and non-motorized access to their forests in the North Cascades by following the links on the [Hampton Lumber](#) website.

Because much of the land in District 14 is private property, hunters should obtain permission to hunt from landowners. For safety, hunters must always be mindful of where houses, livestock, and outbuildings are situated. Portions of District 14 GMUs are under firearm restrictions. Hunters should research land ownership and understand local firearm limitations before hunting.

The Private Lands Access Program has negotiated access for hunters on dozens of private properties throughout Whatcom and Skagit counties. For the 2023-24 season, WDFW staff members have enrolled several deer and elk general season hunting sites in GMU 407 and continue to pursue more access opportunities. The Waterfowl Habitat and Access Program has over 60 sites on private lands for the upcoming waterfowl season (30 in Skagit County and 29 in Whatcom). These sites offer open field or blind-only hunting, primarily targeting dabbling ducks. While most of these sites are Register to Hunt (note that sites are first-come, first-served), several are enrolled in the Hunt by Reservation system. Register to Hunt sites are very similar to Feel Free to Hunt sites (first-come, first-served), but you must complete a registration card when you use a site. Properties Enrolled in the Private Lands Access Program become available for public hunting once the agricultural practices are finished for the year. Because of this, many sites will not be open for the opening day of the waterfowl season. Our lands access program is constantly working to create more public access, so more sites may be added to the program before the season starts. Information on hunting access and these new sites will be available online via the [WDFW Hunting Access webpage](#).



Figure 30. Duck party of mallards, wigeon, and Northern pintail – Photo by Brad Otto

The Hunt by Reservation program offers a quality hunting experience by limiting the number of days a site is hunted while guaranteeing the site will be available to whoever books the reservation. To reserve a Hunt by Reservation site, visit the [WDFW Hunting Access Webpage](#), create an account, choose a hunting site in the Hunt by Reservation category, and book your reservation. Reservations can begin at 8 a.m., two weeks before the hunt day. A fast internet connection improves your chances of securing a reservation.

Private Lands personnel have worked with landowners to grow forage for wintering waterfowl at some sites to provide additional feed for waterfowl. For those lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, this can generate some excellent hunting.

More information about individual sites, including maps, access rules, and the program, may be found on the WDFW [Places to go hunting](#) webpage. Waterfowl hunt units on private lands will open as crop harvests are completed, and other conditions are met, so only some units will be available on opening day.

In addition, the WDFW Private Lands program has developed and enhanced hunting opportunities on WDFW-managed lands. The five hunt sites are found on land managed by the Skagit Wildlife Area. They include South Padilla Bay (Bayview 1, 2, and 3) and Samish River (Edison East and West).

PUBLIC LANDS

Vehicle access by big game hunters to certain Washington Department of Natural Resource (DNR) lands in Skagit and Whatcom counties may be impacted by logging activities during the upcoming hunting season. Access to Van Zandt Dike and Alger Hill Road via Skarrup Road at Parson Creek Road may be restricted by the DNR to manage access during times of active logging. Even if potential closures prohibit the use of vehicles, hunters are allowed access to these areas on foot, mountain bike, or by horse so long as they are respectful of active forestry operations.

U.S. Forest Service (USFS) national forest lands offer some vehicular access throughout Whatcom and Skagit counties. Many road systems have been closed due to flood-related damage, and some roads are subject to seasonal road closures. USFS plans to decommission or abandon a significant portion of its managed road network on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. These closures further restrict vehicular access to upper-elevation habitats for big game and forest grouse hunting. For updated USFS road and trail information, use the [Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie NF Road and Trail Conditions Map](#).

Among the WDFW-managed lands in District 14, waterfowl hunters should consider the Headquarters, Island, Samish (also known as the Welts property), and Johnson/Debay's Slough units in Skagit County, and Tennant Lake, Nooksack, and Lake Terrell wildlife area units in Whatcom County. All these sites are managed for waterfowl and provide walk-in and boat access, with some blinds available. Hunters can visit the WDFW [Wildlife Areas](#) webpage and search WDFW wildlife areas and units by name, county, and region for more information on each location.

SKAGIT COUNTY

For more information on hunting the Skagit Wildlife Area and its various units, please see our [Skagit Wildlife Area Hunting Guide](#) (updated August 2022).

Island Unit

The Island Unit totals approximately 268 acres and is a popular waterfowl hunting site. During the November 2021 flood event, a significant breach occurred on the east lobe of the unit. This area is now intertidal, with daily tides and river levels inundating the site like the surrounding marsh. The unit's west lobe was unaffected by the flood event and is still managed for enhanced waterfowl forage. Hunters can still hunt the entire unit, but because the east lobe of the Island Unit is now intertidal, hunters using this part of the Island Unit should reference a tide chart and Skagit River gauges before going out in the field.

The Island Unit is accessible by boat only. Hunters typically launch from the Skagit Wildlife Area Headquarters Unit or the Skagit County Parks boat launch under the Conway bridge. Be aware that river conditions, even short crossings, may be challenging or dangerous for small boats during high flows and large ebb tides.



Figure 31. A standing cornfield on the Island Unit – Photo by Alan Bauer

Samish Unit

The Samish Unit has 410 acres of grass, seasonal wetlands, and agricultural fields. Approximately 193 acres of barley, fava beans, and corn are planted on the site. Funding for the agricultural enhancements on this unit is provided through the Washington State Duck Stamp program. There are 23 shallow ponds and swales developed in partnership with Ducks Unlimited. Water control structures also allow a high percentage of the area to be flooded with sheet water during the hunting season. The Samish Unit is north of Highway 20 and can be accessed from the parking lot on Samish Island Road.



Figure 32. View of a hunting blind at the Samish Unit on a nice fall day – Photo by Alan Bauer

This site is very popular for waterfowl hunting, and all blinds are available on a first-come, first-served basis. In addition to the existing permanent blinds, temporary blinds will be installed at locations varying yearly, depending on crop plantings and water conditions. Be sure to check the map on-site for the most updated information.

Telegraph slough

The Telegraph Slough Unit is a freshwater wetland created when highway construction crossed the Swinomish Channel to Fidalgo Island. WDFW and the Department of Natural Resources have a land-use agreement to manage the wetland for waterfowl hunting and wildlife observation opportunities. Parking is available off State Route 20, and several small ponds and channels are present depending on water levels. Still, hunters should be familiar with private property boundaries.

Johnson/DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit

The Johnson/DeBay's Slough Hunt Unit is 23 acres and can be a productive hunting site. The unit is planted with barley and corn, depending on the year. Due to its small size, the unit can only accommodate four to five hunting parties. Because this is a field hunting site, it should be hunted with decoys. Temporary blinds are installed in various locations each year, depending on the plantings and water conditions. The blinds are available on a first-come, first-served basis.



Figure 33. Location of Johnson/DeBay's slough blind and parking lot on the hunt unit

Skagit Bay Estuary

The Skagit Bay Estuary Unit starts at the bayfront edge of the delta of the Skagit River (North to South Forks). It extends south towards Stanwood along the north shore of Camano Island or the South Bay area. A large portion of this area's first-class and second-class tidelands are owned by WDFW (approximately 16,000 acres), with private ownerships interspersed. The property provides prime waterfowl hunting from a boat or by foot during low tides. WDFW manages two game reserves in this area, Skagit Bay Delta and Fir Island Farm Reserves.

The diverse Skagit Bay topography includes open saltwater, mudflats, low marsh (grass), and a high marsh of cattails, brush, and taller woody vegetation. The entire area is a maze of channels, cut by both tidal action and currents from the various sloughs of the Skagit River delta. Most bay front hunters set up on the edge of the vegetation line and in the higher marsh, channels, and backwaters. Some hunters prefer to hunt the open water on Skagit Bay.

The entire bay front can offer good shooting, but the most heavily used sites are on the South and North Forks of the Skagit River, downstream from the more popular boat launch access of Skagit Headquarters Unit (WDFW) and Conway Launch (Skagit County). For information about walk-in access options, refer to the [Skagit Wildlife Area webpage](#) for more details.



Figure 34. View from Fir Island Farm Reserve – Photo by Robert Waddell

Large tide swings in Skagit Bay and nearby areas present challenges for waterfowl hunters every season, and both boat and walk-in hunters must be familiar with local tide tables and have a plan for their day before every hunt. Walk-in hunters should pay particular attention to deeper ditches and sloughs that may prohibit return routes or prevent the retrieval of downed waterfowl.

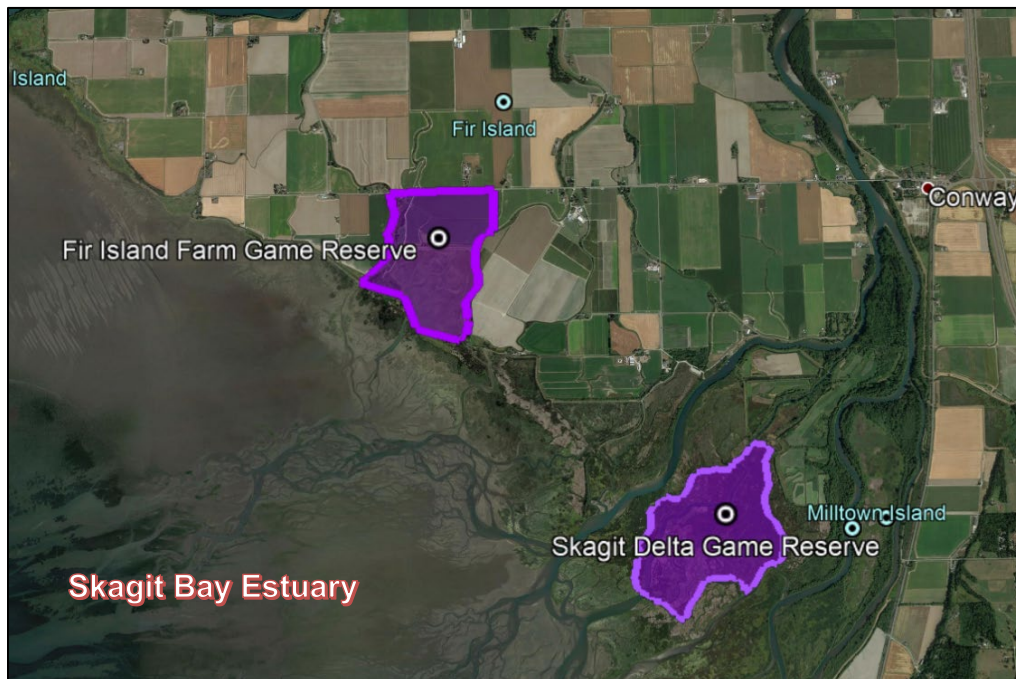


Figure 35. Map of game reserves within the Skagit Wildlife Area

WHATCOM COUNTY

Lake Terrell Unit

The Lake Terrell Unit of the Whatcom Wildlife Area is an important and productive waterfowl hunting site. This unit has over 15 permanently constructed hunting blinds, all on a first-come, first-served basis. One ADA-accessible hunting blind was built by the Whatcom County Chapter of the Washington Waterfowl Association. To make a reservation for this blind, visit the [WDFW Private Lands Hunt by Reservation webpage](#) and search for “Lake Terrell Disability Access Site”.



Figure 36. Lake Terrell Unit – Photo by Robert Waddell



Figure 37. Lake Terrel Unit blinds – Photo by Richard Kessler

Tennant Lake Unit

The Tennant Lake Unit of the Whatcom Wildlife Area has three waterfowl hunting blinds available on a first-come, first-served basis. Hunters can sign in on the day of the hunt at the sign-in box at the top boat launch to let others know which blind they will be using. This site is reliably productive throughout the hunting season.

Figure 38. View from one of the three blinds at Tennant Lake – Photo by Richard Kessler



Nooksack Unit



Figure 39. View of the pond on the Nooksack Unit

The Nooksack Unit is located south of Slater Road at the Nooksack River. It is heavily used during the waterfowl hunting season. At the north end of the unit is a 120-acre agricultural field that is usually planted with corn, potatoes, and barley during the spring. Upon harvest, ten acres of corn and 15 acres of barley are left standing to provide winter waterfowl forage, providing for a high-quality hunting area. Several permanent hunting blinds and temporary stand-up blinds are located within the farm field, with all blinds on a first-come, first-served basis. An ADA-accessible blind is available at the Nooksack Unit. To make a reservation for this blind, visit the [WDFW Private Lands Hunt by Reservation webpage](#) and search for “Shady Lane Disability Access Site”.