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## **DISTRICT 6 HUNTING PROSPECTS**

Okanogan County

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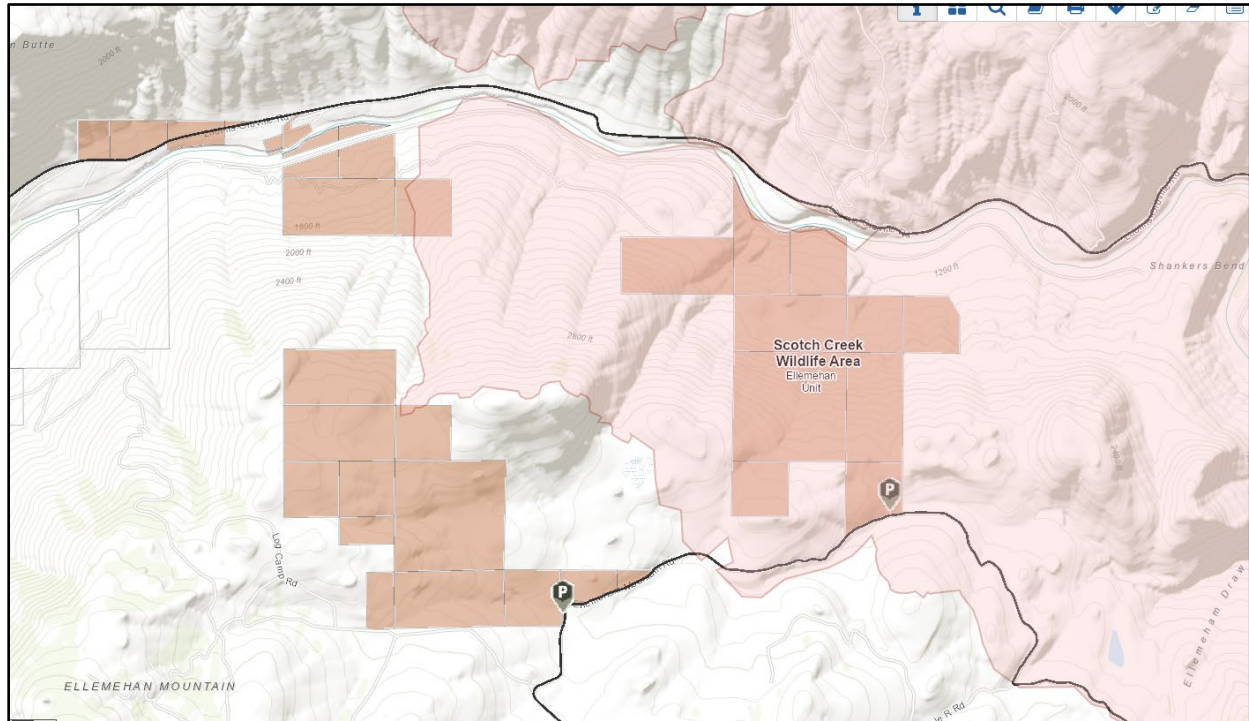
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**All photos by Scott Fitkin unless otherwise noted.**

## FIRE AND ROAD CONDITIONS UPDATE

As of August 10, 2023, only one major fire (Eagle Bluff) has burned in District 6. It is primarily on private land in the northeast portion of GMU 209, and therefore is expected to have minimal impact on district-wide hunting opportunities. The fire burned the eastern portion of the Ellemehan Unit on the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area, but access to this area is currently open.



**Figure 1.** Eagle Bluff fire perimeter encompassing part of the Ellemehan Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area

Additional information on current and past fires can be found on [InciWeb](#) and [CalTopo](#).

Some United States Forest Service (USFS) roads may be closed due to localized washout events, particularly in recent fire perimeters. 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 snow covers 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 a near-equal 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.

Agency biologists are not currently 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 recent positive detections in northwest Idaho. Hunters bringing cervid carcasses from other states are required to comply with current CWD restrictions.

Customizable map products are available on the [WDFW Hunt Planner webpage](#).

**Please be respectful of private land and treat landowners and their property the way you would want to be treated.**



From top: View from the 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 west of the Okanogan River are very difficult to find without extensive local knowledge. Hunters harvested 10 elk in the nine western Okanogan County GMUs combined in 2022.

The eastern portion of the district (GMU 204) is covered by the Selkirk Elk Herd Plan and supports part of the Pend Oreille subherd population. The area's current management objective is to gradually increase elk numbers. Any bull elk may be harvested during general modern firearm and muzzleloader seasons in this unit. 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 26 animals taken in 2022.

For specific harvest information see the [District 6 General Season Elk Harvest - 2022](#).

### WHICH GMU SHOULD ELK HUNTERS HUNT?

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 elk is extremely difficult unless you have up-to-date knowledge on one of the few small bands of elk that travel in and out of the western portion of the county.

## DEER

### GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

District 6 supports one of the largest migratory mule deer herds 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 current District 6 deer management objective is to grow the white-tailed deer herd following recent declines due to drought, fire, disease, and harsh winter weather.



Post-season fawn:doe ratios (productivity) this past fall fell noticeably following extreme temperatures, drought, and wildfires during summer 2021. In addition, overwinter fawn survivorship (recruitment) fell below the long-term average the past two winters, particularly during the winter of 2022-23. These survey results indicate the herd has likely undergone a modest decline the past two years. Fortunately, the winter range has recovered significantly since the 2014-15 fires and all wildfire scars on the district are producing good summer forage. As a result, the population is poised to recover nicely in the absence of extreme drought or harsh winters.

Blue tongue and epizootic hemorrhagic disease were not documented in 2022 and have not been documented in 2023 as of mid-summer.



## WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2023 SEASON

Slightly lower-than-average estimated fawn recruitment in 2022 likely means a modest decrease in 2.5-year-old bucks in 2023. Conversely, last December's observed mule deer buck:doe ratio of 29:100 indicates a good chance to encounter older bucks this season. Overall, total general season harvest and success rates are anticipated to be a little below the five-year averages, but the average age of harvested animals may be up slightly.

Summer temperatures this year have been only modestly above average, but for the most part it has been quite dry including in the high country. This pattern is expected to continue between now and the general seasons. By fall, animals may be more concentrated up high around areas that retain green forage, similar to other dry years.

## WHICH GMU SHOULD DEER HUNTERS HUNT?

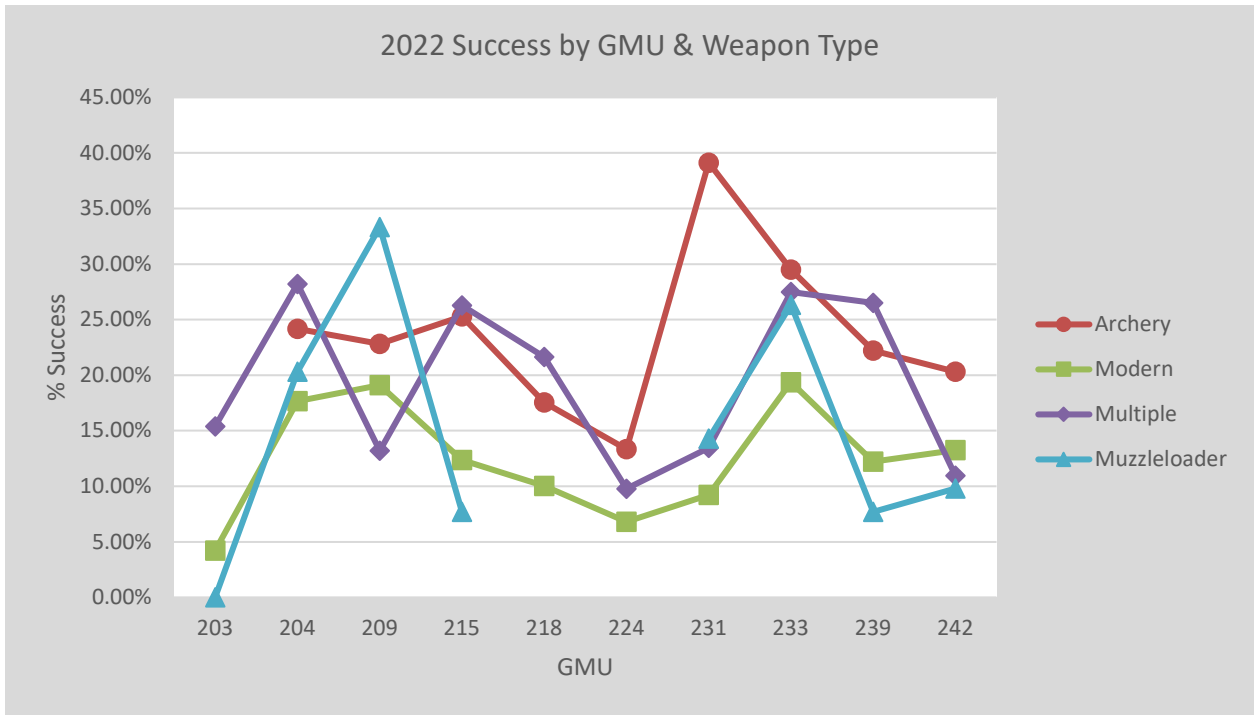
All units in District 6 support significant numbers of deer and large blocks of accessible public land, offering good to excellent deer hunting opportunity. Mule deer are abundant throughout the county, with the highest densities in the western two-thirds of the district.

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 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 before hunting season to access private land.

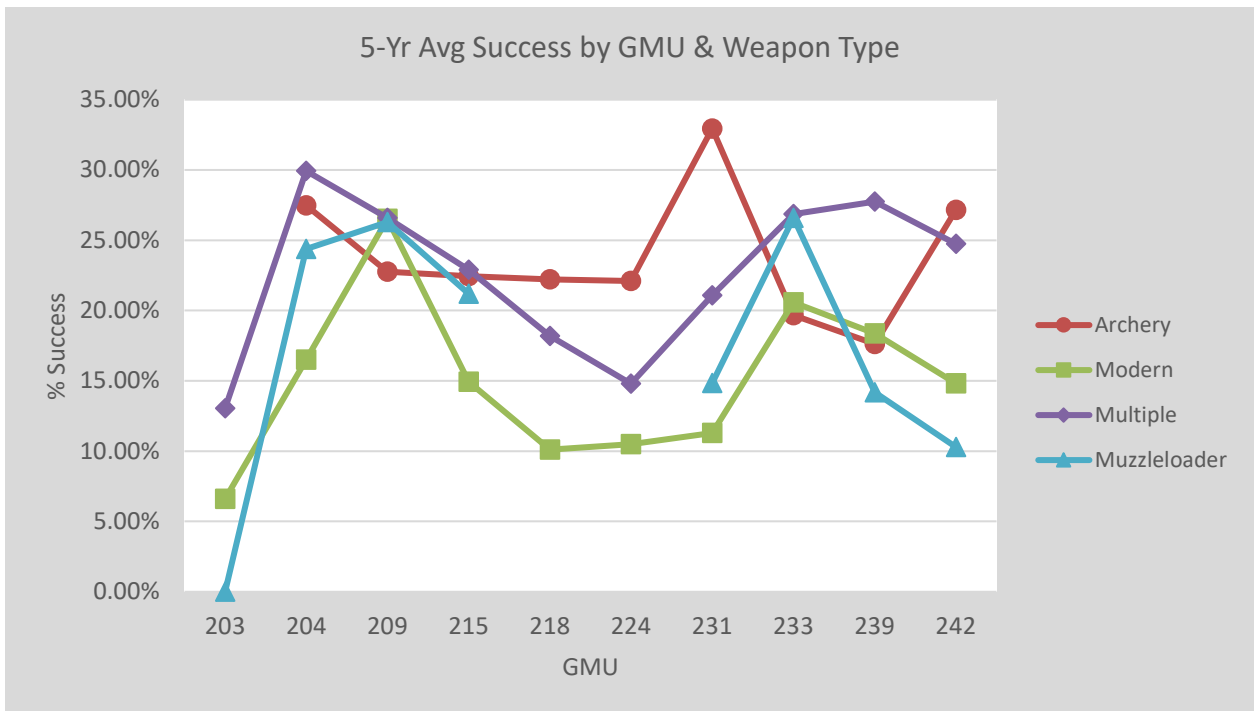
Hunters harvested 1,882 deer (1,690 bucks, 192 antlerless) in District 6 during the 2022 general seasons. This total is down from last year and a little below the five-year average of 2,096. Similarly, general season success rates dipped noticeably across all weapon types. The success breakdown across all GMUs by weapon is as follows: Modern 13 %, Muzzleloader 17 %, Archery 23 %, and Multiple 22%. As expected, GMU 204 (the district's largest unit) yielded the greatest overall general season harvest of 705 deer. In the western portion of District 6, GMU 215 produced the most harvest with 271 deer.

For specific harvest information, please visit [District 6 2022 General Season Deer Harvest](#) [District 6 2022 Special Permit Harvest](#)

Maps for specific GMUs can be found on WDFW's [Game Management Units \(GMUs\) webpage](#) The [WDFW Hunt Planner](#) is an interactive tool that allows hunters to create a customize map.



**Figure 2.** District 6 2022 general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU



**Figure 3.** District 6 5-year average general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU

## 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, particularly if succulent vegetation is available. Many of the burn scars from wildfires since 2001 are producing high-quality summer forage, especially at middle and upper elevations. Hunters have high probability of finding significant deer activity in these areas. 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 all the way to the tree line. At this time of year bucks are often more concerned with security than forage, and will often bed in tree clumps with commanding views. Hunters on foot can find easier access to higher, more open country via 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.

Does are spread throughout the district during the general season, so youth, senior, and disabled hunters holding antlerless tags 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 for the breeding season, often on more southern-facing slopes. In District 6, there is likelihood of high deer numbers at WDFW wildlife areas and immediately adjacent federal lands in late fall. In years with lesser snowfall, some mature bucks may linger at higher elevations. In exceptionally mild years, hunters may have to travel a bit higher than usual to find deer concentrations.

GMU-specific recommendations for late mule deer permit holders:

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

**GMU 218:** The Rendezvous Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area and the Cub Creek, Buck Lake, and Lower Boulder Creek area of the Okanogan National Forest often have late season concentrations of mule deer.

**GMU 224:** Common locations for mule deer include portions of the Methow Wildlife Area and adjacent Okanogan National Forest lands in the southern portion of the unit. This includes more open habitat in drainages such as Pearygin, 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 Okanogan National Forest.

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

**GMU 239:** The Texas Creek Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area and the Chiliwist Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, along with the adjacent Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land, offer good opportunities. Upper portions of Finley, Benson, and Texas creeks on the Okanogan National Forest are also worth a look.

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

### **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 where riparian vegetation or thick cover are adjacent. Like mule deer, white-tailed deer are most active at dawn and dusk, but white-tailed deer 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.



White-tailed deer

During the late permit season, some white-tailed deer summering at modest elevations will move a little way downslope, but most will be in the same areas where they spent the summer.

GMU-specific recommendations for late permit holders and late archery season in the western portion of the district:

**GMU 215:** White-tailed deer are abundant on the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area and Chopaka Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area.

**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 Methow Wildlife Area (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 promising locations.

**GMU 231:** Good possibilities include the huntable portion of the Big Valley Unit of the Methow Wildlife Area, 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 Methow Wildlife Area as they move uphill off private land.

**GMU 233:** Despite the open terrain, the Happy Hill area of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area is productive, along with the Buzzard Lake Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area and adjacent DNR lands.

**GMU 239:** White-tailed deer can be found on Okanogan National Forest land in the South Summit area between Loup Pass and Leecher Mountain and in wetter areas in the western portion of the Chiliwist Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area 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 Methow Wildlife Area, 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**

Hunters with second deer permits in Deer Areas 2012 – 2016 should 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 reasonably abundant and well-distributed throughout District 6 and are managed for sustainable harvest and diverse age structure. The local black bear population and associated harvest appeared to be relatively stable through 2018. In 2019, the bag limit was raised to two bears in eastern Washington. Since this change, harvest has increased by an average of 32% in District 6 as a whole and by roughly 45% in the western two-thirds of the district. Recent data from western Okanogan County estimated black bear densities (including cubs) to be about 22 bears per 100 square kilometers; about average for eastern Washington. Densities in GMU 204 in the eastern third of the district are suspected to be somewhat higher, and WDFW plans to launch a similar density survey effort there next spring.

For hunters pursuing black bear in the northern portion of the Washington Cascades, it is critical to be able to positively identify bear species, as endangered grizzly bears could potentially be seen in this area. 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 on [WDFW's website](#).



Cinnamon-phase black bear

## WHICH GMU SHOULD BEAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All GMUs in the Okanogan District provide good black bear hunting opportunities. In 2022, the success rate (11.6 %) in the Okanogan portion of Bear Management Unit (BMU) 5 rose noticeably along with an almost 50% increase in harvest. These increases were likely the result of increased harvest vulnerability as bears wandered widely in search of food during a particularly bad berry year. By contrast, both the harvest and the success rate fell modestly in GMU 204 in the Northeastern BMU(7) last year.

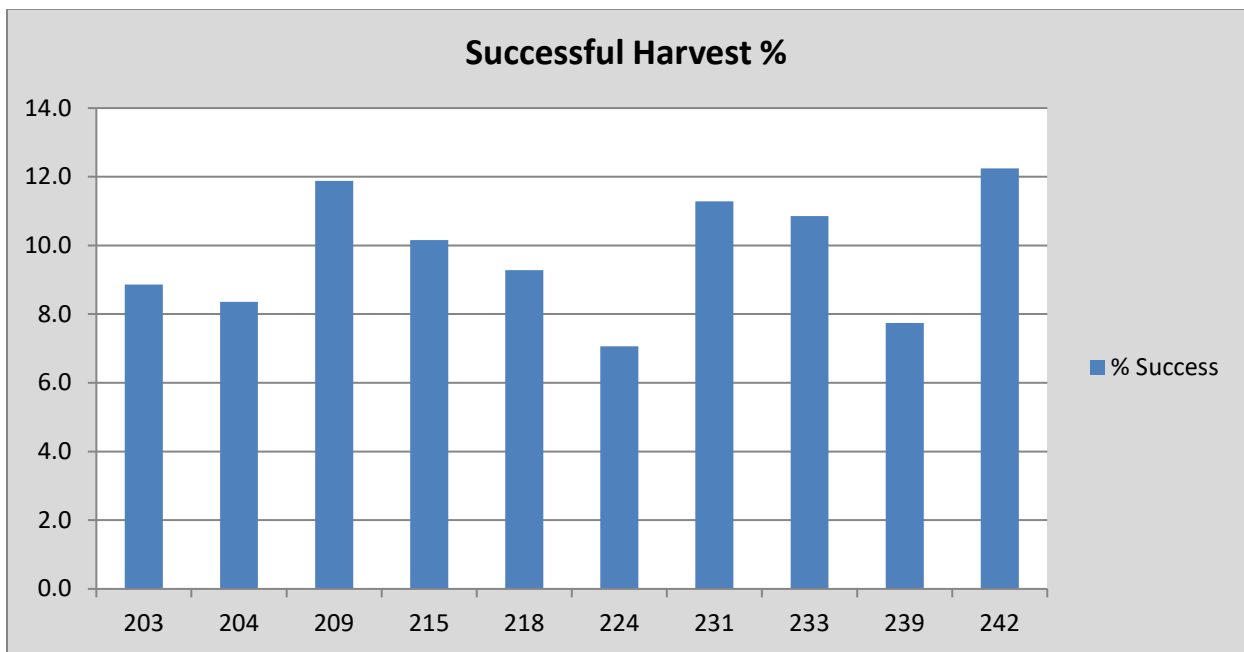


Figure 4. Okanogan District 5-year average black bear harvest success rates by GMU

For specific harvest information, visit [BBMU 5 2022 Black Bear Harvest](#) and [BBMU 7 2022 Black Bear Harvest](#).

## WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2023 SEASON

At the beginning of black bear season, animals are likely to be found at middle elevations in areas where berries are peaking. As the season progresses, expect bears to follow the ripening berries to higher elevations. Most berry crops appear to be robust this year. An exception may be a lack of huckleberries at high elevations near the Cascade Crest in some locations. 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 Population Management Units comprised of one or more GMUs close on short notice once the harvest guideline has been reached. Hunters are responsible for knowing if a unit is open or closed. This information is available via the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) or [WDFW's website](#).

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 2022-23. See the five-year harvest summary table (Table 1) for more information.

PMU Hunt Area GMUs	Adult Harvest Guideline	2018-2019 Adult Harvest	2019-2020 Adult Harvest	2020-2021 Adult Harvest	2021-2022 Adult Harvest	2022-2023 Adult Harvest
203	4-5	0	0	0	0	0
204	6-8	8	4	4	3	3
209, 215	3-4	4	3	6	3	4
218, 231	4-5	2	0	1	0	1
224	2	2	0	0	0	0
233,239	4-5	4	2	2	0	3
242,243	5-6	5	3	2	1	2

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

## 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. Hunters can find good public river access 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 recovered somewhat following last winter's significant snowfall, but dry summer weather is now shrinking some quickly. River levels are currently running below normal, and the long-term forecast suggests this will be the case into the fall. Aside from water levels, waterfowl hunting opportunities are mostly dependent on the number of birds migrating from Canada and Alaska, and how long it takes before water on the district freezes.

2022 waterfowl harvest numbers will be made available on the WDFW [Game harvest reports webpage](#). Methods used for small game harvest analysis have been revised and this year's results will not be directly comparable to previous years.

## FOREST GROUSE

### SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

The Okanogan supports robust populations of ruffed, dusky (blue), and spruce grouse within 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 the hunting season, dusky (blue) grouse are generally encountered in 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 on WDFW's [Forest grouse hunting tips webpage](#).

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 region. 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 could now support good ruffed grouse populations. The conifers, preferred for dusky and spruce grouse habitat, will take longer to recover, but the birds are beginning to use the habitat again in some portions of the Tripod fire area. Bird numbers outside of burned areas appear to be relatively stable, but fluctuate annually with the severity of winter and spring weather.

### HARVEST TRENDS AND 2023 PROSPECTS

For several upland bird species, the number of adults in breeding areas this spring and summer appears to have declined following the extended winter; however, the brood success of these birds looks good.

Last year's harvest figures are not currently available.



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 Chiliwist 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 on WDFW's [Pheasant hunting tips webpage](#).

Pheasant release sites are mapped in the [Eastern Washington Pheasant Release Program Booklet](#). Hunters are reminded that nontoxic shot is required for **all** upland bird hunting on **all** pheasant release sites statewide.

2022 pheasant harvest numbers will be made available on the WDFW [Game harvest reports webpage](#). Methods used for small game harvest analysis have been revised and this year's results will not be directly comparable to previous years.



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. For several upland bird species, the number of adults in breeding areas this spring and summer appears to have declined following the extended winter; however, the brood success of these birds looks good. Tips for hunting quail are available on WDFW's [Quail hunting tips webpage](#).

2022 quail harvest numbers will be made available on the WDFW [Game harvest reports webpage](#). Methods used for small game harvest analysis have been revised and this year's results will not be directly comparable to previous years.

## 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 220 birds during the general fall season in North Central Washington. Both the harvest number and the 31% success rate were similar to the previous season.

For specific harvest information visit [2022 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 shrubsteppe habitats. Hunters frequently encounter partridge on most all wildlife area units in the district. Scattered groups of chukar can be found in rocky areas in lower elevations of District 6. 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 by visiting [Hungarian partridge hunting tips](#) and [Chukar hunting tips](#).



Hungarian Partridge

For several upland bird species, the number of adults in breeding areas this spring and summer appears to have declined following the extended winter; however, the brood success of these birds looks good.

2022 partridge and chukar harvest numbers will be made available on the WDFW [Game harvest reports webpage](#). Methods used for small game harvest analysis have been revised and this year's results will not be directly comparable to previous years.



## DOVE

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Look for doves in planted food crops in the Sinlahekin and at lower elevations on other public lands. With warmer fall temps becoming the norm, doves now frequently stay in District 6 well past the Sept. 1 opener.

2022 dove harvest numbers will be made available on the WDFW [Game harvest reports webpage](#). Methods used for small game harvest analysis have been revised and this year's results will not be directly comparable to previous years.



Mourning dove on the Methow Wildlife Area