

Oregon spring bear season gets underway

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

SALEM, Ore. — Spring bear hunting opened April 1 in western Oregon and the western Blue Mountains, but hunters need not be in a hurry to head out.

“I was in the Cascades in really good bear habitat at low elevations the week of March 19 but I did not see any fresh bear sign,” says Brian Wolfer, ODFW district wildlife biologist based in Springfield. “I think at this point some Cascade bears are up but the hunting will likely be better toward the middle of the season.”

Spring bear hunters are advised to:

Look for open areas where bears will be moving through or foraging, including clear-cuts, meadows and open slopes that have cleared of snow.

Earlier in the season, focus on south-facing slopes with rapid spring growth and open canyon slopes, where bears can be seen feeding on grass and digging roots.

Predator calls are recommended later in the season when elk begin calving. Use calls near open meadows in forested areas.

Find good vantage points and utilize optics to locate bears; early morning and late afternoon to evening are the best times to glass.

Know your target—remember it is unlawful to take cubs less than one year old or sows with cubs less than one year old.

See below for more information on conditions and locations to hunt. Hunters should be prepared for snow and limited access, especially early in the season. Visit ODFW's online Hunting Access Map for more hunting locations.

Remaining spring bear seasons in eastern Oregon open April 15. All spring bear hunting closes May 31.

Mandatory check-in of bears: New rules this year

Since last year, successful bear hunters have been required to check-in their bear's skull at an ODFW office within 10 days of the harvest so biologists can collect a tooth and take certain measurements. (More information.) To save the time of both hunters and ODFW staff, a new rule requiring bear skulls to be unfrozen when presented for check-in is now in effect. (It is very difficult to extract a tooth from a frozen skull.) ODFW also recommends hunters prop the bear's mouth open with a stick after it is harvested, again to make tooth extraction and measuring easier.

This data collection is a critical part of the method ODFW uses to track Oregon's bear population. ODFW also asks any hunter that takes a female bear to collect and turn in its reproductive tract, which helps determine reproduction rate and frequency. See page 34 of the Oregon Big Game Regulations for more information.

Mandatory reporting

Separate from the check-in requirement, all hunters who purchased a spring bear tag are required to report their hunt results online or by phone (1-866-947-6339). Reporting is required even for those that did not go hunting or were unsuccessful. ODFW uses this information when setting hunting seasons.

Last year, only 8% of spring bear tag holders (537 of 6,485) reported their hunt results. Mandatory reporting was introduced in 2008 and currently there are no penalties for not reporting, but penalties and/or incentives may be introduced for future hunting seasons if hunters continue to not report.

Northwest Region Hunts

Wilson-Trask units (Hunt 712A, season April 1-May 31)

As with last year, green-up is occurring later than usual, the higher elevations of the coast range still have snow, and the district has not received reports of bears out and about yet. So don't feel the need to get out too early in the season says District Wildlife Biologist Herman Biederbeck. With current weather conditions, hunters should concentrate in river and creek bottoms and south-facing grassy slopes where new plant growth will be coming on earlier. Last year's success rate for this hunt was 7 percent (267 hunters took 20 bears).

Locations: Hunters can utilize state and federal lands in the units, including the Tillamook and Clatsop State Forests and Siuslaw National Forest. Some industrial forest landowners allow spring bear hunting as well. Private forest and agriculture lands dominate the eastern side of the Trask unit; access is by permission only. Due to moderately heavy snow this winter, there are road systems that have not been maintained since fall 2008 and some roads could be closed. ODFW staff has seen trees blocking roads in some sections of the eastern Trask Unit.

N. Cascades (Hunt 716A, season April 1 – May 31)

Expect better hunting later in the season (late April/early May), but if you want to get out early, start along riparian corridors at lower elevations. Watch weather forecasts to help predict snowmelt; warmer weather will be key for vegetation growth and increased bear activity. Snow in higher elevations will restrict access. Last year, success rate for this hunt was just 1 percent (182 hunters took 2 bears).

Locations: Hunters can use the Mt. Hood and Willamette National Forests. Remember that the Marion and Linn County portions of the Santiam and McKenzie Units are open only on the Willamette National Forest; private and BLM lands within these two counties are not included in the hunt boundary. While hunters can find south facing slopes throughout the Mt. Hood NF, the Collawash River drainage has a higher concentration of open ground and some good areas for glassing.

Alsea-Stott Mt. (Hunt 717A, season April 1 – May 31)

ODFW's Newport office has already received a few reports of bear sightings in this area. There is still some snow in higher elevations. Bears prefer skunk cabbage and other riparian plants in the early spring; stream corridors are often productive for hunters. Other areas to check are grassy spur roads and south-facing slopes. Last year, success rate for this hunt was 7 percent (165 hunters took 12 bears).

Location: In general, bears are more abundant closer to the coast. Access is fair on mainline forest roads. In particular, Siuslaw National Forest lands on the central coast south of Waldport have well-maintained roads, making them good places to hunt.

Southwest Region Hunts

SW Oregon (Hunt 722A, season April 1 – May 31)

Snow pack this year appears to be at or below normal so access should be good throughout the upcoming season. However, bear activity is normally slow in the early half of the season. While that means bears may be hard to locate in the early season it doesn't mean these hunts can't be fruitful. Often the earliest bears to come out of dens are boars and the larger animals.

Bear numbers in the entire region have been stable for many years. In general, bear density is greatest closer to the coast. Good spots to check are skid roads and side roads that are untraveled with lots of grassy margins and bear sign. Hunters should put their emphasis on watching clearcuts and natural clearings. The Biscuit fire area around the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area in the Chetco unit continues to offer better visibility than other areas. While visibility is not as good in the Tioga and Siuslaw units, bear numbers are good there as well. Last year's success rate for the SW Oregon hunt was 9 percent (2,063 hunters took 189 bears).

The SW Oregon spring bear hunt became a first-come, first-serve hunt with the 2009 season and tags sold out before the controlled hunt draw.

Locations: There is lots of public land in the SW Oregon hunt, including national forest land (Siuslaw, Rogue-Siskiyou, Umpqua, Willamette), BLM land and state land like Elliot State Forest. Do your homework and call private timberland companies as some offer access; local landowners include Weyerhaeuser, Plum Creek, Menasha/Campbell Group, Roseburg Forest Products, and Lone Rock Timber Co. Hunters can access public land and some private timberland through the Jackson Cooperative Travel Management Area (JACTMA). JACTMA restricts use of certain roads through April 30; for a map contact an ODFW office.

Northeast Region

W. Blue Mountains (Hunt 749A, season April 1 – May 31)

This area's bears tend to get active later in April. Also the region had as much snow as it did last year, another reason that hunters don't need to head out too early. Bear density is highest in the northern portion (north of Interstate 84) and lower as one goes south and west in the hunt area. Bear activity early in the season is concentrated along the lower elevation fringes of national forest land. Bears follow the green-up elevation band; concentrate on timbered slopes with small openings with lush green moss, sedge, or grassy areas. Last year, the success rate was 19 percent, the highest of all spring bear hunts, with 139 hunters taking 27 bears.

Locations: The hunt boundary contains a large amount of public land including the Umatilla National Forest.

Starkey (Hunt 752A, season April 15 – May 31)

Bear numbers are strong. The area received less snow than last year and access will be easier than in 2008 provided warm spring weather comes. Though challenged by access, early-season hunters have a better chance at a bigger boar. Be sure to check access and road conditions before heading out to hunt; call USFS or ODFW.

Wallowa District Hunts (Season April 15- May 31)

District staff have observed no bears out of dens yet. The region still has lots of snow so access will be difficult early in the season.

General overview: Hunter success is expected to be similar to past years with bear numbers stable in all units except Snake River, where numbers seem to be down slightly. Deep snow will prevent hunters from accessing traditional hunting areas in all units. If weather patterns continue to be cold, hunters can expect bear activity to be slow until warmer weather patterns prevail. Bear activity generally improves by the first week of May.

Hunt 756 and 756T (youth hunt), Wenaha Unit: Deep snow at higher elevations. Hunters can utilize the Umatilla National Forest but the forest does maintain a road closure in portions of the unit; call for more information (tel. 541-278-3716). Last year's success rate for the adult hunt was 11 percent (148 hunters took 16 bears).

Hunt 757A and 757T (youth hunt), Sled Springs and Chesnimnus units: Deep snow at higher elevations. Wallowa-Whitman national forestlands provide good hunting opportunities. Remember the Noregaard, Whiskey Creek and Shamrock Travel Management Areas will be in effect in the Sled Springs unit through May 31; maps are available at entrance points or at ODFW's Enterprise office. Last year's success rate for the adult hunt was 15 percent (171 hunters took 25 bears).

Hunt 759A, Snake River Unit: Bear numbers appear to be down slightly. Wallowa-Whitman national forestlands provide good hunting opportunities. Most of the Snake River unit still has a considerable amount of snow, so access will be difficult until May. Last year's success rate for this hunt was 9 percent (269 hunters took 23 bears).

Hunt 760A and 760T (youth hunt), Minam and Imnaha units: Hunters can use the Eagle Cap Wilderness; bears are generally located at lower elevations. Much of the wilderness is heavily timbered making visibility a challenge. The lower reaches of Bear Creek and the Minam River are good places to hunt. Portions of the Minam and Imnaha units still have a considerable amount of snow so access will be difficult until May. Last year's success rate for the adult hunt was 13 percent (128 hunters took 17 bears).

Pine Creek-Keating-Catherine Creek (Hunt 762A)

Baker District has received no damage complaints or sightings yet but boars should start coming out soon. While the snow pack is only moderate, Baker experienced a later than average spring this year. The lower elevations in the Pine Creek Unit near Oxbow and Hells Canyon are snow free, but higher elevations near Pine Creek and McGraw Overlook still have deep snow. The snowline in the Keating Unit is right at the national forest boundary so there is no public access for bear hunters at this point. The majority of roads in all units are still impassible; contact USFS or ODFW for conditions before heading out. Last year's success rate was 8 percent (244 hunters took 20 bears).

Locations: Low to mid elevation areas above Hells Canyon Reservoir or Pine Creek are recommended; later in the season try McGraw Creek.

Lookout Mt. Unit (764)

Low to mid elevation areas of Lookout Mtn. unit are snow free. Try south facing slopes near the treeline above Brownlee Reservoir. Heavy high and mid elevations snow will reduce motorized access to this unit. Private lands limit access; only hunters that already had permission from private landowners should have applied for this hunt. Last year's success rate was 7 percent (28 hunters took 2 bears).

High Desert Region

South Central (Hunt 731A, season April 15 – May 31)

Bear populations are stable to slightly increasing but low compared to other areas of the state. The highest bear densities are in the Cascade Mountains with lower densities in the drier, semi-desert portions of the hunt area. Areas for hunters to check include the Keno Unit, western portion of the Sprague Unit, and the Gearhart Mountain area in the Interstate Unit. Focus on the unburned fringes around 2002 fires (Grizzly Fire in the Interstate Unit and the Toolbox/Winter Fire in the Silver Lake Unit) and in riparian areas. In the northern portion of Fort Rock unit bear populations are low and hunters should expect low success. Bear activity is most common west of Highway 97 in the vicinity of riparian vegetation. Last year's success rate was 4 percent (57 hunters took 2 bears).

Locations: Public access is good within the Fremont-Winema and Deschutes National Forests and on open private timberland. Please respect private property, avoid driving on soft or muddy roads. Access for the opener will be limited by snow at all but the lowest elevations. Muddy roads and snow drifts on north slopes will restrict access in areas above 6,000 feet until the later part of the season.

Hood Unit (Hunt 742, season April 15-May 31)

Hunting for spring bears in the Hood Unit can be challenging. Snowpack in higher elevations of the Hood unit may keep many bears in hibernation longer this year and reduce early season access. Hunters wanting to hunt the early part of the season should focus their efforts on clearcuts at lower elevations. Later in the season, when beehives are out in orchards for pollination, hunt forestland near the beehives or seek permission to hunt on private orchard ground that borders the timber. Last year's success rate for this hunt was 11 percent (28 hunters took 3 bears).

Locations: Hunters can utilize both public land (Mt. Hood National Forest and Hood River County land) and private industrial forestland open to hunting.

South Blue Mtns (Hunt 746A, season April 15-May 31)

The hunt area experienced a light winter. Snow levels are high and should not have much effect on hunter access. Bear populations are stable or increasing but this hunt is still challenging, due to the heavy forested terrain which makes it difficult to spot bears. Observations from an ongoing statewide bear study suggest that the northwest section of the Murderers Creek, Beulah, and Northside units have higher bear densities. Hunters often use this tag as an opportunity to scout new hunting areas for next fall's deer and elk seasons, turkey hunt, or collect shed antlers. Remember it is legal to take naturally shed antlers, but not skulls with antlers attached. Last year's success rate was low; 141 hunters took 2 bears.

Locations: Hunters may want to focus their efforts on open ridges early in the morning or near meadows with good green grasses. Most bear habitat for this hunt is in national forests (Malheur, Ochoco, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman) with some BLM land in the western Northside unit. Consult federal land managers for any road closures or restrictions. Private lands are by permission hunting only.

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