

ODFW's 2006 High Desert Fall Hunting Forecast

by Bend Weekly News Sources

High Desert Deer

MAURY, OCHOCO, AND GRIZZLY UNITS: Overall deer populations are below desired management objectives; however, fawn survival was above average this winter which should provide good numbers of yearling bucks this fall. Bucks in all three units are at or slightly above desired management levels. The Rager Cooperative Travel Access Program will be in effect on the Paulina Ranger District with no changes from last year. Motorized vehicle restrictions associated with the program start three days prior to the buck season opener and run through elk seasons. Hunters should expect difficult hunting and reduced success if warm, dry weather occurs and should check with BLM and Ochoco National Forest offices for fire restrictions in effect.

UPPER DESCHUTES, PAULINA, METOLIUS, NORTH WAGONTIRE, AND NORTH FORT ROCK UNITS: Fair numbers of mature bucks and yearling bucks should be available in the Paulina and Fort Rock units. Most of these units are either at, or just under, management objectives for buck ratios. Populations in the Metolius and Upper Deschutes Units are 40 percent below population objectives and 20 percent below in the Paulina unit. Populations are declining as a result of many factors, including predation, disease, road kill by vehicles, loss of habitat through development, forest succession and increased harassment. As a result, hunter success is expected to be only fair to good in the Paulina, North Fort Rock, Upper Deschutes and Metolius units. Success should be good in the North Wagontire. Please refer to the 2006 Oregon Big Game Regulations for a listing of the road closure areas in the Paulina and Fort Rock units. An Adenovirus Hemorrhagic Disease (AHD) outbreak in the Metolius and North Upper Deschutes units in 2002 continues to impact deer numbers somewhat in both units. This disease is not known to be transmissible to humans.

SILVER LAKE AND FORT ROCK UNITS: Normal winter snow pack and spring rains resulted in good forage conditions. Over winter fawn survival was good which should result in good yearling buck numbers. Both units were over management objectives in December, 2005 so mature bucks should be available. Areas burned in 2002 have been salvage-logged on summer range and fire tolerant shrubs are recovering.

SOUTH WAGONTIRE, JUNIPER, WARNER AND WEST BEATYS BUTTE UNITS: Normal winter conditions resulted in only average spring fawn survival. Post-season buck ratios were above management objectives with the exception of the North Warner unit. All units are below population management objectives. Yearling bucks will be less abundant than during the 2005 hunting season.

KENO, KLAMATH FALLS, INTERSTATE, SPRAGUE, AND SOUTH FORT ROCK UNITS: Over-winter fawn survival was average for most south-central units this past year. While the winter was not considered severe, winter conditions persisted into early April which resulted in lower fawn survival. Deer populations in all units remain below management objectives. Buck ratios remain at or above management objective, thus there should be good carry-over of mature bucks. Hunters can expect an average year.

WHITEHORSE, OWYHEE AND BEULAH UNITS: Hunter success in these units is expected to be fair to good. Fawn ratios were higher than recent years, therefore, recruitment into the adult population should be good this year. Buck ratios are at management objectives in the Owyhee unit and above management objectives in the Whitehorse and Beulah units. This means that mature bucks should be available, particularly for hunters that take the time to do some pre-season scouting. Expect a season comparable to 2005. Summer has been extremely hot and dry so hunters may experience difficult hunting conditions. Expect to see deer concentrated around water unless we get fall rains before the rifle season. Due to the dry conditions, hunters are reminded to be extremely careful with fire and check with the local land management agency for travel restrictions before they go hunting.

MAUPIN, WEST BIGGS, WHITE RIVER AND HOOD UNITS: A good fawn crop last year and excellent over winter survival combined with above management objective buck ratios contributed to an increase in tags for this year in the Maupin and West Biggs units. Poor winter survival of fawns kept the buck tags in the White River Unit the same as last year with the prospects for yearling bucks decreased. The Hood Unit offers good hunting prospects for those that put in the time to hunt the thick cover; this is where hunters will find the older age class bucks. Hunters should concentrate their efforts around recent logging activities.

SILVIES, MALHEUR RIVER, JUNIPER AND BEATYS BUTTE UNITS: Over-winter fawn survival was high in the Silvies, Malheur River, Juniper and Beatys Butte units for the second consecutive year. Yearling

bucks will be in good supply, and there is a fair carry-over of mature bucks from last year. Hunter success in these units is expected to range from 35 to 50 percent depending on weather conditions. Above average precipitation has produced excellent forage and water availability, so expect deer to be widely distributed in these units.

High Desert Elk

MAURY, OCHOCO, AND GRIZZLY UNITS: Elk populations are near population management objectives in the Ochoco and below in the Grizzly units and Maury units. Calf survival was good in all three units, which should result in a better than average crop of yearling bulls this fall. Hunters searching for larger mature bulls should find good numbers in the Ochoco unit this year. Dry summer conditions have led to increasing use of lower elevation private lands in all three units. Those hunters with early season private land cow hunts will need to scout often and work with landowners to determine elk use patterns. Those hunters with Grizzly Private Lands either sex tags (238C1 and 238C2) are reminded that Ochoco Lumber Company property is not included in the hunt boundary.

Hunters are urged to use good judgment and caution when hunting near or on private lands and to always have landowner permission prior to hunting. Young hunters participating in the Ochoco Youth Antlerless Hunt are encouraged to scout prospective hunting areas for elk use. The Rager Cooperative Access Management Program is in effect with no changes from last year.

UPPER DESCHUTES, PAULINA, METOLIUS, NORTH WAGONTIRE, AND NORTH FORT ROCK UNITS: Elk numbers continue to grow slowly in the Cascade units. In the Paulina, East Fort Rock and the North Wagontire units, elk populations appear to be declining and are widely scattered. Relative to the number of elk, branch antlered bull opportunity will be fair in the Paulina and East Fort Rock units. The Upper Deschutes, Metolius and West Fort Rock units are managed under the general season "Cascade"™ hunt. Branch antlered bull opportunities outside of wilderness areas will be poor to fair in these units. Weather will play an important role in improving hunter success and hunt quality if early winter weather arrives. Most elk in the "High Desert"™ Wagontire Unit are found in the north half of the unit and will be widely scattered.

EAST FORT ROCK, EAST SPRAGUE, SILVER LAKE, KLAMATH FALLS, INTERSTATE AND WARNER UNITS: The general first season has been replaced with limited-entry hunting beginning this year. Also new this year, the bag limit for the second season has been changed from either-sex to bull only. Elk numbers are low and animals are scattered throughout the area. Hunters should not expect to find large concentrations of elk. Access is excellent throughout most of the area, with the Klamath Unit being the only one with extensive private lands. It also has the lowest elk numbers. Although elk densities are low throughout these units, elk are most numerous in the East Fort Rock, Silver Lake, and Sprague units. Weather will play an important role in hunter success and hunt quality as early snow improves hunting conditions.

Elk numbers in the Silvies and North Malheur River units are similar to last year. However, spring calf survival was up compared to the previous year, so more spike bulls should be available for the hunter. Abundant forage and water will allow elk to be widely scattered throughout these units. Rifle bull hunter success is expected to average from 10 to 20 percent, with approximately half the harvest comprised of branch-antlered bulls.

Elk numbers have declined over the last five years in the High Desert Hunt Area and tag numbers have been reduced correspondingly. Due to the large remote nature of the area and low elk densities, biologists recommend pre-hunt scouting trips for those unfamiliar with the country. Elk populations are best in the north half of the Steens and Wagontire units, and in the Stinkingwater Mountains south of Hwy 20, in the Malheur River unit.

KENO, WEST SPRAGUE, and WEST FORT ROCK UNITS: These units are within the General Cascade Elk Season. Elk numbers are slightly increasing, however animals are scattered throughout the area. Hunting should be fair, depending on weather conditions. Bull ratios are good with older bulls available. Access is good on Winema National Forest, BLM and private timberlands open to hunting.

MAUPIN, WEST BIGGS, WHITE RIVER AND HOOD UNITS: Elk numbers in the White River and Hood units are near the management objective and will be found scattered in small groups throughout the units. Bull numbers are fair, but heavy cover makes harvesting one a challenge. Most hunters choose to hunt the second of the two general seasons, which is longer and has a better chance of getting snow, improving the hunting conditions. Bull elk hunting in the Maupin and West Biggs also is general season, but the animals are

almost exclusively found on private lands. Unless a hunter knows a landowner in that area, it will be very difficult to find a place to hunt

SILVIES, NORTH MALHEUR RIVER AND HIGH DESERT UNITS: Elk populations in the Silvies and North Malheur River units remain near management objectives. Over winter calf survival was high, so there should be good numbers of young bulls available. Abundant water and forage will allow elk to be widely distributed. Rifle bull hunter success is expected to average between 10 and 20 percent, with approximately half the harvest being comprised of branch-antlered bulls.

Bears and Cougars

MAURY, OCHOCO, AND GRIZZLY UNITS: Bear are scattered and present at low numbers throughout the forested portions of the Grizzly and Ochoco units. Harvest success will likely be low, with better hunting on the northern portions of Lookout Mountain, Paulina Ranger District and Ochoco National Forest. The district continues to see slow, but steady, growth in cougar numbers and harvest. Animals are present in all three units, from low elevation sagebrush rangelands to higher elevation mixed conifer forestlands. The animals' distribution is closely tied to deer and elk and hunting on big game winter ranges late in the year has been effective. Suggested areas to consider include: Maury Mountains, Salt Creek, and Bear Creek (Maury); Lookout Mountain, upper Bridge Creek, and South Fork John Day River (Ochoco); and Mill Creek and Green Mountain (Grizzly).

High Desert Upland Birds

ODFW would like to extend the wing collection effort to include blue and ruffed grouse and mountain quail harvested in western Oregon. Hunters participating in this program will be sent wing collection bags and instructions on how to properly submit wings and tails. If you would like to assist ODFW in this effort, please write to ODFW, 3406 Cherry Ave. NE, Salem, OR 97303, Attn: Dave Budeau or send an email to david.a.budeau@state.or.us Your assistance would be greatly appreciated.

WASCO AND SHERMAN COUNTIES: Upland game bird hunters should have above average hunting success. A mild winter helped with good winter survival, but late spring rains caused lower brood size. Chukar numbers are at a 20-year high. California quail numbers remain good and pheasant numbers remain low. Dove numbers are above the long term average. Hunters must have permission to hunt on private property. Some private land access can be found through Upland Cooperative Access Program lands in Sherman County. See page 39 of 2006-2007 Oregon Game Bird Regulations for details.

CROOK AND JEFFERSON COUNTIES: Marginal spring nesting conditions coupled with a severe hail storm in mid June may be the cause of below average brood counts for quail and chukar. Dove numbers are up. The best quail hunting will be at lower elevations on private and BLM lands where wet areas provide cover and riparian habitat if the season starts out hot and dry. Chukars are scattered and will be found predominantly in rocky canyon areas along the upper Crooked, Deschutes, and John Day river systems. Access to public land is limited and hunters need to be mindful of private property and have permission from landowners. Success for dove will depend on weather conditions staying favorable. Both blue and ruffed grouse should provide only fair opportunities at higher elevations on the more densely forested northern portions of the Ochoco National Forest. The Youth Pheasant Hunt is planned for the weekend of Sept. 16-17, with pre-registration at the Prineville Field Office (541 447-5111) starting Sept. 1. Those interested in participating are encouraged to register early.

DESCHUTES COUNTY: Upland game bird hunters should have an average season for species in the area. California (valley) quail populations are in good shape and will supply good hunting opportunities. Most California quail are found on or near private lands where hunters must get permission to hunt. Mourning dove populations should provide good hunting opportunities as long as the weather remains mild. Ruffed and blue grouse are present in low densities along the east slopes of the Cascades. Upland game birds, rabbits (jack and cottontails) and coyotes all appear to have had a good production year.

LAKE AND KLAMATH COUNTIES – Good winter precipitation and dry summer weather has resulted in excellent brood production and survival for most upland game birds. Excellent numbers of valley quail are available in foothill areas, mostly on private lands. The best areas for blue and ruffed grouse are in the Cascades on Winema National Forest. Blue grouse can be found along ridge tops in more open forest habitats while ruffed grouse are generally found along riparian areas. Fair mountain quail hunting opportunities are

available in the Cascades. Hunters are reminded of the two bird bag limit in Klamath County. Lake County is closed to mountain quail hunting. Chukar hunting should be good in eastern Lake County. Pheasant and quail production was good at Summer Lake Wildlife Area and should provide favorable hunting opportunities for quail. No pheasants are released at Summer Lake Wildlife Area, and wild pheasant numbers are at very low levels. In Klamath County, chukars will again be released in the Klamath Hills. Wild pheasant numbers remain at extremely low levels. Unlimited Pheasants will be releasing pheasants at Klamath Wildlife Area and selected private lands open to the public. Sage grouse production was good. Hunting is by limited entry only.

HARNEY COUNTY: Chukar, California quail and sage grouse populations remain healthy, although production appears to be down somewhat from previous years. Hunters can expect another good year, with mixed populations of chukar and quail available on public lands. Sage grouse hunting should be good for those hunters who draw a limited entry permit to hunt these birds. Pheasant nesting success was fair, but habitat and bird numbers are limited in Harney County. Hunters pursuing chukar and California quail on the west side of Steens Mountain should be aware of a newly established population of mountain quail in the area. The mountain quail season is closed in Harney County.

MALHEUR COUNTY: Upland bird brood surveys indicate a fair hatch and survival for pheasant and chukar. Spring rains and thunderstorms resulted in some failed nest attempts, but it appears that many of these birds re-nested. The large number of carry-over birds from last year should result in populations similar to last year offering good hunting. California quail production is high as a result of these birds nesting a little later and avoiding the spring rains. Hunting for these species should be similar to 2005. The majority of pheasants occupy private lands, so ability to access quality habitat will influence hunting success. Hunters must have permission to hunt on private lands. Mourning dove season is expected to be good until cool weather causes local birds to migrate south. Best hunting for doves is around desert water holes, agricultural lands and weedy areas. Sage grouse experienced a moderate brood year but hunting should be good as populations are still strong. Sage grouse hunting is by limited entry only.

High Desert Waterfowl

WASCO, SHERMAN AND HOOD COUNTIES: Goose hunting opportunity in wheat fields should be average with most access via private land. Some private land access can be found through Upland Cooperative Access Program lands in Sherman County. See page 39 of 2006 -07 Oregon Game Bird Regulations for details. Duck hunting is mostly jump shooting on private lands and should offer good opportunity where available.

JEFFERSON AND CROOK COUNTIES: Mallards and Canada geese are the most common waterfowl species in these counties. This was a good production year for geese and below average for ducks. Hunting opportunities are expected to be average on local birds, but most of the hunting opportunity will be on private land where access is difficult.

DESCHUTES COUNTY: Goose hunting prior to freeze up should be very good; resident Canada geese had an excellent production year. Duck hunting should be average.

HARNEY COUNTY: Early season waterfowl hunting should be good, as waterfowl production improved due to excellent spring habitat conditions. Two consecutive years of above average precipitation has restored the water levels in many of local lakes and reservoirs, improving public access. The public hunting area at Malheur National Wildlife area has ample water and should provide some excellent hunting opportunity. Late season goose hunting should be good over decoys for those hunters who have access to private alfalfa and grain fields.

LAKE AND KLAMATH COUNTIES: Early season usually is best for local and early migrant birds, and hunters can expect to find abundant gadwalls and mallards in the Klamath Basin, Summer Lake Basin and Lake County major wetland areas. Much improved water conditions exist compared to last year. The Warner Wetlands and Warner Valley lakes north of Hart Lake have abundant water and should provide good waterfowl hunting opportunities. Hunting prospects will depend on Pacific Northwest weather systems moving birds in Klamath and Lake Counties before freeze up. Most goose hunting occurs on private lands and hunters are reminded to ask permission from landowners before hunting private lands. These private lands can provide excellent opportunities for those willing to seek access and spend some time scouting. Snow goose hunting at Summer Lake Wildlife Area should be good. Production from the nesting colony on Wrangel Island, Russia was reported to be very good for the second consecutive year. Favorable weather conditions

will be necessary to encourage large numbers of geese to stage in the basin, reduce overflights directly to wintering areas further south, and create favorable hunting conditions.

New this year for Klamath County: a new goose zone has been created, the September Canada Goose season has been closed, and a late white-fronted goose season has been adopted for late February and early March to help alleviate agricultural damage from large numbers of white-fronted geese. Spring surveys observed over 400,000 white-fronted geese staging in the Klamath Basin during early March. The late white-front season will only be open for private lands and the bag limit will be two white-fronted geese per day. See the 2006-07 game bird regulations for specific season dates for this new zone.

The Summer Lake Wildlife Area is closed during the September goose season. Klamath Wildlife Area wetlands in Unit A and Unit C are being renovated. Construction activities may affect waterfowl hunting opportunities in these units during the early season. Goose hunting should improve later into the season with freezing conditions, which tend to concentrate geese near open water areas.

SNAKE RIVER VALLEY: Spring rains resulted in flood events on the Snake River, lower Owyhee, and lower Malheur River, reducing waterfowl nesting success along these rivers. These rains filled reservoirs in the area and production on the reservoirs and local ponds appears to be good. Late season hunting will depend on weather conditions in the north that push the birds south into the Snake River area. Generally this happens late in the season. Waterfowl seasons in southeast Oregon will be allowed to run late into the winter again this year. This should improve hunting opportunity in the Snake River Valley.

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