

District 14

Skagit and Whatcom Counties

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District 14 Description

The core Game Management Units (GMUs) that comprise District 14 are GMU 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo) and 437 (Sauk). Portions of GMUs 407 (North Sound), 448 (Stillaguamish) and 450 (Cascade) are also within the district. Land ownership in the District includes private residential and private agricultural in the lowlands (e.g. GMU 407 and the Nooksack and Skagit River valleys). Private industrial timber lands and lands managed by Washington Department of Natural Resources comprise the majority of the lower elevation foothills, while higher elevation forest lands are in public ownership (i.e. U.S. Forest Service and North Cascades National Park).

The Skagit Delta is host to abundant waterfowl resources, including the highest concentration of lesser snow geese in Washington. WDFW's private lands access programs are again providing new and improved opportunities for hunters during 2012-2013 hunting season. Further inland, big game species such as elk in the North Cascades and the Mount Baker population of mountain goats offer some of the best trophy animal opportunities in western Washington for those who get drawn for these areas.

Current Species Status

The status of all big game and waterfowl species hunted in Skagit and Whatcom Counties remain unchanged from previous years. The growing North Cascades elk herd has garnered the most attention in the district of late. Population growth and expansion has resulted in increased levels of elk-related conflicts in the Skagit Valley and near Acme in Whatcom County. This has resulted in liberalized hunting seasons in some GMUs, expansion of the GMU 418 (Nooksack) limited entry bull hunt, and 20 new archery and muzzleloader tags in Elk Area 4941 in Skagit Valley.

Big Game

Elk: The North Cascades (Nooksack) elk herd continues to grow and expand into areas of formerly unoccupied habitat. This includes agricultural areas where they cause damage to crops and farming infrastructure. Until recently, data from post-hunt surveys (conducted in late March to early April) indicated that the population was expanding at a rate of 6-7 percent. However, over the past two years, lethal removal of elk in agricultural landscapes by landowners, master hunters, and tribal hunters appears to have slowed this somewhat. The total population size is currently around 1,200 animals. Bull:cow and calf:cow ratios from 2013 surveys were 37:100 and 27:100, respectively, indicating that winter survival was similar to previous years.

Given the limited hunting opportunities for this elk population, hunter success is an inadequate indication of population dynamics. However, it is worth noting that, of the 23 limited entry GMU 418 (Nooksack) bull permit holders, only 16 hunters harvested an elk (8 spikes and 8 branch antlered bulls) resulting in a harvest rate of 70 percent. Since 2007 when this hunt began, hunter success has ranged from 61 to 93 percent.

Elk hunting prospects in District 14 are limited to the North Cascades (Nooksack) herd, with the best hunt opportunity being a limited-entry bull-only harvest in GMU 418. Established in 2007, this hunt continues to produce quality bulls and relatively high hunter success. General season elk harvest opportunities in GMU 407 (North Sound) and that portion of GMU 448 (Stillaguamish) in Skagit County exist on both private and state lands, however elk densities in these two units are low and hunting pressure quickly pushes those animals into adjacent GMUs that remain closed to general harvest. On the positive side, the North Cascades elk herd continues to grow and expand its range, increasingly the likelihood for future harvest opportunities.

Hunting regulation changes for elk in District 14 are intended to address elk-related agricultural conflicts. These include:

- Expansion of Elk Area 4941 eastward to the Dalles Bridge near Concrete
- Inclusion of Elk Area 4941 for the limited entry bull elk hunt
- 10 new archery tags (5 early and 5 late) for antlerless elk in Elk Area 4941
- 10 new muzzleloader tags (5 early and 5 late) for antlerless elk in Elk Area 4941
- Addition of muzzleloader season in GMU 407 (North Sound) with liberal antler restrictions and season dates
- Extension of early archery season in GMU 407 with liberal antler restrictions

Annual harvest reports and harvest statistics based on hunter reporting can be found at [Game Harvest Reports](#).

Black-tailed Deer: Black-tailed deer surveys have not been conducted in District 14 for several years; however biologist's observations and other anecdotal reports suggest that deer population numbers and densities are down in GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), 437 (Sauk) and 450 (Cascade). Conversely, in portions of GMU 407 (North Sound), the most urbanized GMU in the District, local deer densities can be quite high and can be a nuisance for some property owners and agricultural operations.

From a hunting perspective, GMU 407 unarguably provides the best opportunity for harvesting a deer in District 14. In 2012, 574 deer were harvested in GMU 407, as compared to 119 in GMU 418 and 121 in GMU 437. The key to a successful harvest in this GMU is securing the appropriate permission to hunt on private land and scouting the area prior to the hunting season. Hunters who intend to target deer in developed areas would be well advised to check with local jurisdictions regarding firearm restrictions. Also see page 81 of the [2013 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations Pamphlet](#).

Elsewhere in District 14, private industrial timber lands and property managed by Washington Department of Natural Resources are largely gated due to timber theft, dumping, vandalism and other problems. However, many of these roads can be accessed on foot or with mountain bikes,

allowing those willing to do the work, access to deer that don't get as much hunting pressure. Be sure to check with the appropriate land owner/manager and obey all posted rules and regulations.

Finally, for those seeking a high elevation trophy black-tail hunting experience, areas within GMUs 418 (Nooksack), 426 (Diablo), and 437 (Sauk) that can be accessed by Forest Service road and trail systems lead to high mountain hunting areas such as the Mount Baker Wilderness Area in Whatcom County and northern portions of the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area in extreme southeastern Skagit County. While relatively few deer are harvested in these GMUs (particularly GMU 426), some very nice bucks were harvested in 2012. Quality buck tags for modern firearm hunters currently provide the best opportunity in these GMUs. Of these 60 tags issued in 2012, harvest success rate among those that reported ranged from 45.5 percent (GMU 418) to 57.1 percent (GMU 426).

The only changes proposed for black-tailed deer hunting for the 2013-2014 season are increased access to private lands in GMU 418 for the modern firearm quality buck hunt. This is made possible by a new provision in the annual landowner agreement between WDFW and Sierra Pacific Industries.

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Black Bear: Black bear surveys are not conducted in District 14. Instead, hunter harvest and age data gotten from teeth submitted by successful hunters is used to monitor population trends. The total number of bears harvested during the fall of 2012 in GMUs 418 and 437 decreased by roughly 20 percent from the previous year. Only with only 88 bears harvested in these GMUs during the fall, however hunter participation was lower and hunter success rate decreased only modestly. Hunter prospects for harvesting a black bear in District 14 therefore remains good to excellent.

Despite a 50 percent increase in tags allotted and a 15 day extension to spring bear season, only 10 of 30 spring bear permit holders successfully harvested a bear in 2013 within this small damage area. Several hunters who completed a post-hunt questionnaire indicated that they observed several bears while hunting. With exceptionally warm spring and early summer temperatures, berry production has been early and bountiful. While patchy in places, the mountain huckleberry crop should be abundant. Similar to deer, access behind gated roads is largely available to those willing to walk or mountain bike and there are ample numbers of clear cuts with younger age class regeneration units that will attract bears. At higher elevations, those willing to hike in-pack out, can pursue bears in classic alpine environments where spot-and-stalk opportunities await.

Mountain Goat: The Mount Baker area continues to have one of the largest concentrations of mountain goats in Washington State. Mountain goat hunting in Washington is a once-in-a-lifetime harvest opportunity and is a limited-entry tag that only a few lucky individuals draw in any year. Aerial surveys in late July of 2012 were a welcome contrast to 2011, when it appeared that winter kill hit this population and adversely affected juvenile recruitment for that year. In contrast, the 2012 and 2013 surveys (just completed) are more closely aligned with population estimates and age composition observed since 2005. During this period, the overall population has averaged roughly 300 goats within the Mount Baker survey blocks.

For 2013, four mountain goat tags were issued for this area (one each in the Lincoln Peak and Avalanche Gorge hunt units and two in the Chowder Ridge hunt unit). Statewide harvest success rates for mountain goats are generally 75% or greater in any year and Mount Baker has produced some mature goats of exceptional quality. Given that the statewide mountain goat auction and raffle permit holders may hunt in this area, and unknown levels of harvest by Native American tribes, tag allocation for this unit remains conservative.

Forest Grouse: Ruffed and sooty (formerly classified as blue) grouse are present throughout the public and private forest lands in District 14. Exceptionally warm and dry spring weather should have a positive effect on grouse brood production and survival this season. While neither species are especially abundant in Skagit and Whatcom Counties, higher elevation subalpine habitats support decent numbers of sooty grouse, while ruffed grouse tend to occupy deciduous dominant forest types associated with riparian areas as well as low elevation conifer forests.

Hunters targeting ruffed grouse should focus on elevations below 2,500', particularly in riparian forest habitats, early seral forests (5-25 years old), and deciduous-conifer mixed forest types. The prospects for harvesting sooty grouse go up with increasing elevation. Hunters can expect the greatest success along trails and ridgelines above 2,000-3,000 feet and within Pacific silver fir and noble fir forest stands with huckleberry, grouse whortleberry and other species. Because both species utilize gravel, grouse vulnerability, and consequently hunting success, is often highest along abandoned or low traffic forest roads, particularly in the early morning hours.

Pheasant: Game-farm produced pheasants will be released this fall on sites which are mapped on [Go Hunt](#) website and in the [Western Washington pheasant program booklet](#). Pheasant release sites in Whatcom County include the Lake Terrell Wildlife Area, and the Intalco and British Petroleum release sites. District 14 personnel will continue to release pheasants at the Bow Hill pheasant release site on Washington Department of Natural Resources lands for the 2013 season. Non-toxic shot is required on all pheasant release sites.

Wild Turkeys: District 14 is not managed for wild turkeys and the species remains relatively rare. WDFW receives occasional reports of individual turkeys throughout western Washington. Such individuals are invariably a result of accidental escape or intentional release (by private parties), which are not sanctioned by WDFW. The overall scarcity of turkeys in District 14 equates to extremely poor prospects for harvest.

Quail: There are relatively few quail in District 14 and most are in developed environments not suitable for hunting.

Dove: District 12 is not a major dove area, with only an average of around 30 doves harvested during the season. While not a managed game species, Eurasian collared doves (an exotic species) are increasingly common throughout District 14. This species can be hunted year-round and the best opportunities are in lowland agricultural areas.

Waterfowl: More waterfowl are harvested in Region 4 than any other region in the state and District 14 continues to provide some of the best waterfowl hunting opportunities. In 2013, Skagit County was again the state's second best duck producing county in the state (following Grant County), with total duck harvest up slightly from 2011 (49,893 vs. 48,828). Total duck harvest in

Whatcom County was virtually the same in 2011 and 2012. The 2012 snow goose harvest in Skagit and Snohomish Counties was nearly 50 percent from 2011. Lower overwintering goose numbers likely contributed to this. However, a bigger factor is that snow geese in the population have been expanding their distribution and exploiting a broader spectrum of food sources, making them more challenging to hunt.

In western Washington and British Columbia, spring waterfowl surveys indicate that the resident breeding duck population is unchanged from 2011. However, farther north, the delayed spring in Alaska and the Yukon adversely affected available breeding habitat and the total duck estimate was 27 percent lower than 2011. While down 33 percent from 2011, mallard numbers are still near the long-term average. Provided that the weather cooperates, increased duck numbers should equate to increased harvest opportunity in Skagit and Whatcom Counties.

Early season hunting opportunities in District 14 are generally much more favorable on the saltwater marshes. Boat access greatly improves hunting options and prospects. However, the early winter conditions experienced in 2011 illustrate that this is not always the case. Both private and public lands in Skagit and Whatcom Counties with good food resources (e.g. corn, barley) ultimately provide good hunting prospects when winter conditions ultimately arrive.

Among the WFDW owned and managed lands in District 14, waterfowl hunters should look to the Skagit Headquarters Unit, Samish Unit (also known as the Welts property), Debay Reserve, Lake Tennant and Lake Terrell Wildlife Areas. All of these sites are managed for waterfowl and provide walk-in and/or boat access and some blinds available. The Private Lands Access Program working out of the La Conner Field Office has once again negotiated access for hunter on dozens of private properties throughout Whatcom and Skagit Counties.

Given changes in snow goose distribution and feeding habits, the hunt units in Snow Goose Quality Hunt Program in 2011 were not very productive. As a result, the number of snow goose quality hunt units and where they will be located remain undecided at this time. Agricultural lands on Fir Island, northwest of Burlington, and south of Edison are currently the most favorable locations for snow goose hunting. Most of this is on private land, but in some instances coincides with properties that WDFW has enrolled in the Waterfowl Quality Hunt Program.

For a thorough discussion on how and where to hunt waterfowl, see [“Let’s Go Waterfowling!”](#)

Hunter Access

Hunter access on private lands for big game hunting opportunities remains limited. Because of past experience with theft, vandalism, dumping, and other problems, private industrial timber companies generally do not allow vehicular access. Many limit access to walk-in only, while some do not allow access of any kind. With less hunting pressure, this can result in good hunting opportunities for those willing to use bicycles or hike behind locked gates. One exception to this is Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns significant private industrial timber lands in Skagit and Whatcom Counties. A landowner access agreement between Sierra Pacific and WDFW continues to facilitate hunter access for limited-entry bull elk and spring bear permit holders. For 2013, WDFW staff will also facilitate access on Sierra Pacific’s lands for modern firearm black-tailed deer quality buck permit holders.

The Private Lands Access Program will once again have 40 to 50 Waterfowl Quality Hunt sites on privately owned lands that offer either “open field” or “blind only” hunting. Currently these sites are managed as first come-first served feel free to hunt sites. However, several of these sites may be changed to reservation only hunting before the season gets under way. The number of Snow Goose Quality Hunt sites is likely to decrease significantly in 2013. This is due to diminished hunt quality associated with expanding snow goose distribution and evolving habitat preferences.

Public Lands

Hunter access in District 14 remains largely unchanged from 2012. WDFW owned lands associated with the Skagit and Whatcom Wildlife Areas will continue to provide similar hunting opportunities for waterfowl and pheasant release.

Hunter access to Washington Department of Natural Resource lands remains unchanged from 2012 with most road networks gated. US Forest Service 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. The Forest Service is currently in a planning process to decommission/abandon a significant portion of its managed road network. Ultimately, this will further restrict vehicular access to upper elevation habitats for big game and forest grouse hunting.