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Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas Counties

CONTENTS

DISTRICT 17 GENERAL OVERVIEW1

ELK2

DEER4

WATERFOWL5

DOVE.....6

FOREST GROUSE8

PHEASANT.....9

QUAIL.....10

TURKEY13

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR AND HUNGARIAN)14

DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in south central Washington. Game Management Units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali) and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats ranging from lowland shrub steppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and abundant hunting opportunity. The District is probably best known for elk. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state with over 12,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are over 6,000 elk in the Colockum herd which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunity in District 8. Yakima County is near the top of the list in harvest of many bird species; ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove, #3 for both duck and chukar, #4 for pheasant, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many areas to choose from. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the interstate. West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000 acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, huns, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys are a relative newcomer to the District. Birds were first introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990's, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest has increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. The populations in GMU 335 (Teaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in Northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent hunting 4-5 hours closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70% of the bighorn sheep in the state of Washington. While it is still difficult to draw a permit to hunt, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip. Rams are in rut mid-October through November when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

ELK

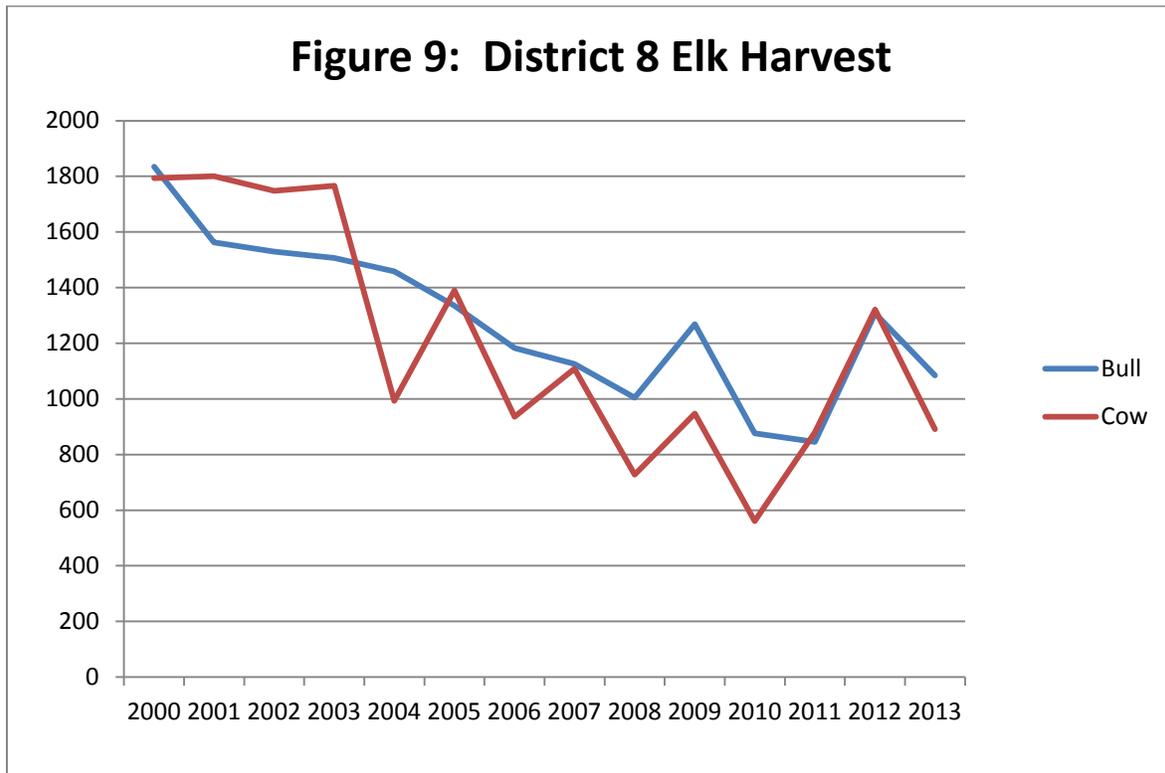
This district is the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the second weekend. As hunters have become less active, harvest has declined (figure 9) despite stable or increasing elk numbers. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last 2-3 days of the season, away from open roads.

The winter of 2013-14 was very mild. Elk did not show up on feed sites or typical winter range areas in large numbers, so aerial surveys were not conducted in the Yakima area. There were fairly large numbers of elk going into the 2013 season and harvest was lower than expected. If not harvested, elk in District 8 have demonstrated typically high survival. Surveys in the Colockum did find increased numbers of elk and the same is expected for the Yakima herd. Both the Yakima and Colockum herds are above objective and opportunity is being increased via special permits. Relatively high numbers of antlerless permits were issued for the 2014 season. Muzzleloader hunters have a high probability of drawing an antlerless permit. Archers should note GMU 335 is now open for antlerless early season, while GMU 342 was added to the late general season. Expect opportunity to be maintained or increased for all users in the near future.

For big game hunters in eastern Washington, drawing a special permit in the quality bull category is the ultimate opportunity. That certainly applies to District 8 in the south-central part

of the state where the majority of quality bull permits are available. Our advice to most hunters who come here is to continue to hunt the general elk season for spikes, but keep putting in for special permit hunts and accruing bonus points, so that someday you will draw a quality elk permit and already know the country you would be hunting for that big bull. “Quality” elk hunting in this part of the state includes a very good chance of seeing several mature bulls in a season.

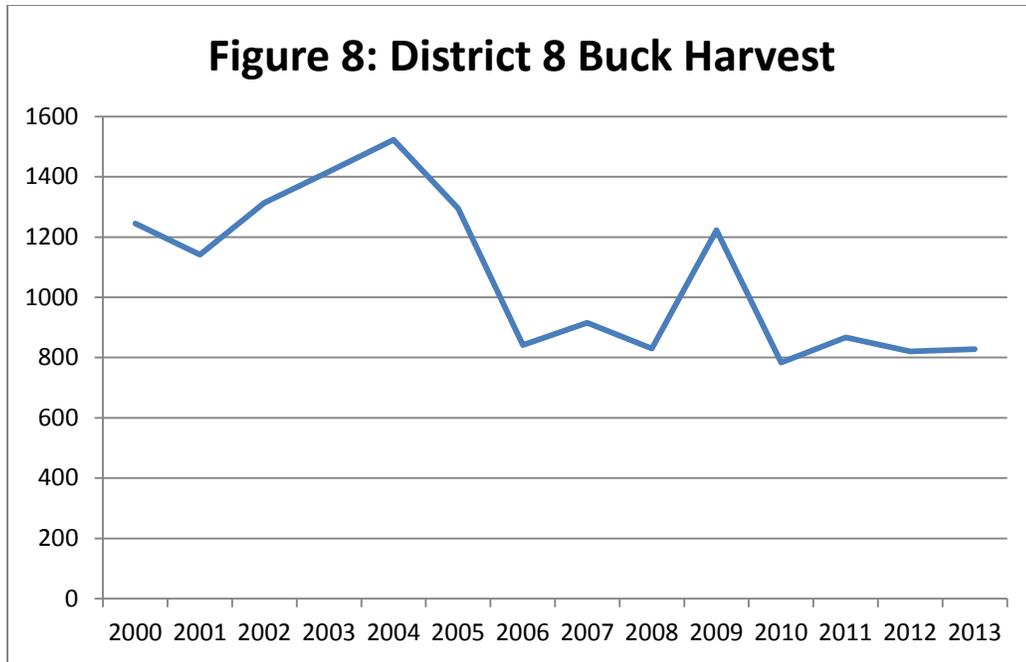
Elk hunting success in this district is often related to weather. Warm, dry falls without snow in the high country to move elk around often makes for lower harvest and hunter success. When early snow comes, most hunters know that the elk hunting can be great in this part of the state, as elk begin to move lower towards their wintering areas. Elk are still around when the early snows do not come, but hunters will find them at higher elevations on summer ranges even into the fall. Some of the wilderness country in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.



DEER

Deer harvest in District 8 has been down from historic highs for a number of years, most likely reflecting the effects of deer hair-loss syndrome associated with exotic lice. The average hunter success the last 5 years has been 8% compared to a statewide average of 28%. Following a sharp decline from 2004-2006, the harvest has been relatively static of late. There was no change in 2013. There have been mild winters and decent fawn production, but there hasn't been much of a detectable population response. 2014 may not be much different, although there are some signs of slow recovery in the deer population. Areas such as the Teanaway remain among the best prospects for deer hunting opportunity.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters are probably setting up camp and claiming their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Hunter success is typically highest in GMU's 335 (Teanaway) and 342 (Umtaneum), but so are hunter numbers.



WATERFOWL

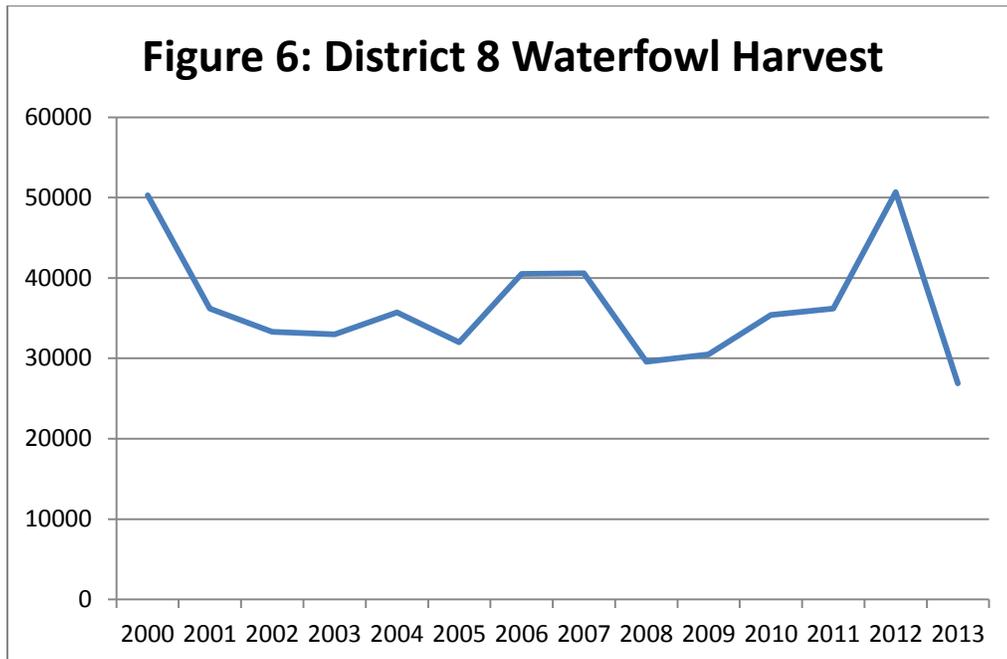
The USFWS flyway counts indicate 2014 populations are up from 2013 and 43% above the long term average. Mallard populations in the flyway were up 5% from 2013. Widgeon and teal numbers are up 14% and 18%.

Yakima County has averaged over 31,000 ducks harvested the last 5 years, which is 3rd best in the state. In 2013, the harvest declined almost 50% to one of the lowest levels in years (Figure 6). Even private guns clubs noted the low numbers of ducks. The reasons for this aren't completely known. Early in the season, local ducks left portions of the valley and the migrants did not appear to stop. The weather was typical, with a freeze around Thanksgiving and a thaw in January. Some birds used the valley in late January, but overall numbers were low most of the season. This followed an excellent year in 2012. An El Nino winter is predicted for 2014, which usually means above average temperatures. Hopefully 2014 will be more like 2012 than 2013.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge. The Yakama Nation (YN) maintains a public hunting program and there are great duck hunting opportunities on the reservation. The YN-managed Satus Wildlife Area often averages over 4 birds per hunter opening weekend. YN is also working on retaining corn stubble on tribal lands. If successful, expect more mid-to-late season ducks in the valley. For information on hunting YN, visit ynwildlife.org.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. No data are available on the 2014 production, so it is difficult to predict early season success. Late season hunting can be difficult. Most ponds and sloughs often freeze over around Thanksgiving. When there are long periods of cold weather, the vast majority of ducks roost in the Lower Toppenish Reserve during legal shooting hours. Even if the Yakima River stays ice-free, few birds are flying around areas with public access. For late season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, “new” ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see: [“Let’s Go Waterfowling.”](#)



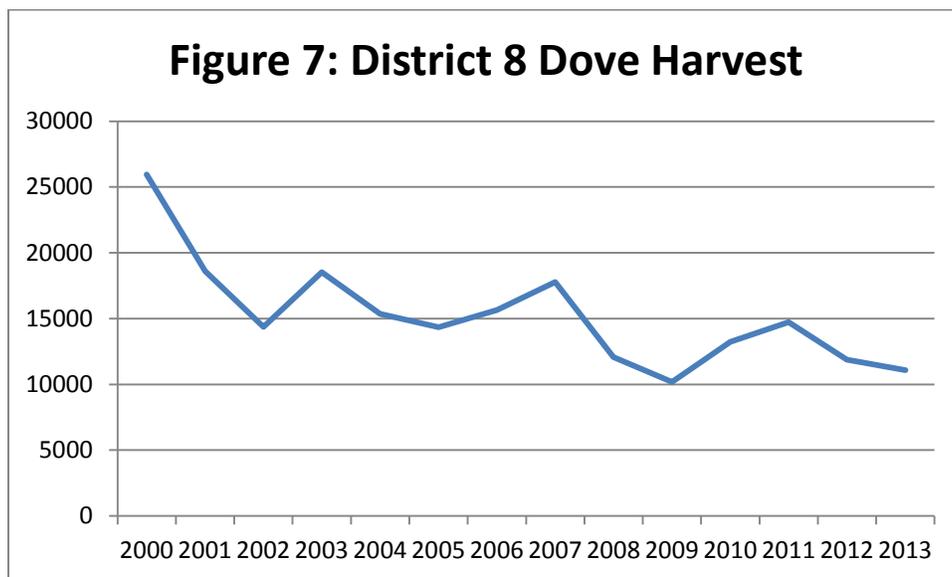
DOVE

Trapping/banding has just begun at this writing, so no new information is available on survival/hatch. Yakima County typically ranks 2nd in the state for Dove harvest. The best success is in the lower Yakima Valley. Good public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area and the Yakima Nation (YN) Reservation. YN grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting YN, visit ynwildlife.org.

Dove hunting success depends on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area late August or early September. Despite a 30 day season, the average dove hunter only spends 3 days

(opening weekend) pursuing doves. Harvest has been relatively stable the last 5 years (Figure 7) despite declining hunter numbers.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunity, as the season is 365 days, no limits. Eurasian Collared Dove numbers have increased dramatically in the last 5 years. No information is collected on harvest, but collared doves are now very common. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to act more like rock doves (*i.e.*, pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunity at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds rather than targeted by most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

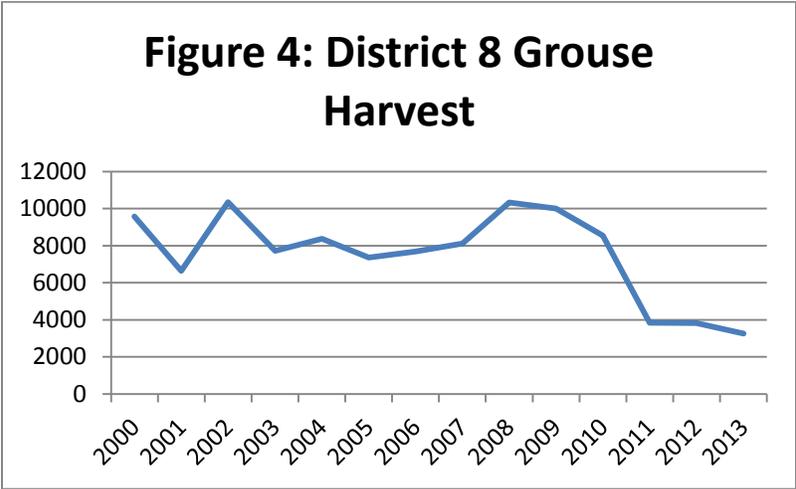


FOREST GROUSE



The 2013 grouse harvest in District 8 was one of the lowest in recent history (Figure 4), hunters averaged only 0.2 birds per day. No data is available on the 2014 hatch.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are the most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.



PHEASANT

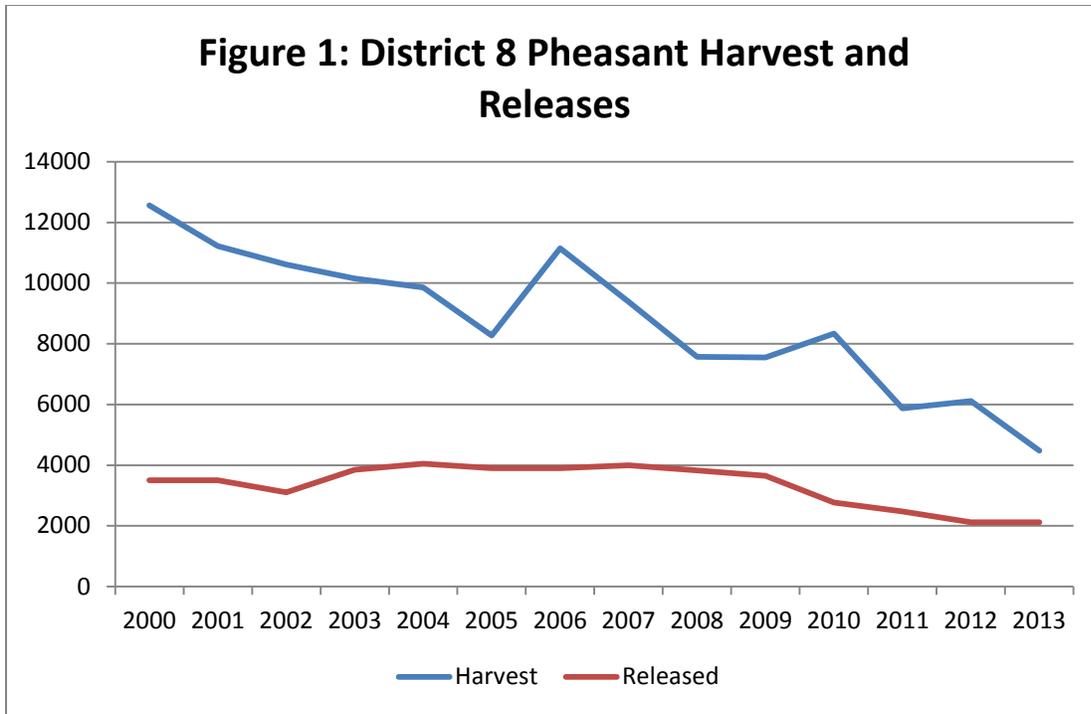
The 2013 pheasant harvest in District 8 was one of the lowest in recent history (Figure 1). There are very few wild pheasant in the district outside of the Yakima Valley on the Yakama Nation (YN) Reservation. The trend on the YN Reservation has been for declining pheasant populations due to conversion from idle land to crops, especially grain farming. The main reason for loss of pheasant habitat is the Energy Independence and Security Act (2007) which mandated increased use of “renewable” fuel. Ethanol production increased from 1.6 billion to 13.9 billion gallons between 2001 and 2011. Much of the ethanol is produced from corn. The act set a goal of 15 billion gallons of ethanol from corn by 2015. Approximately 2.4 million acres of additional corn will be needed by 2015. There will be considerable pressure to convert any land capable of production into crops and the downward trend in pheasant will likely continue.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult. More moisture is usually better than less. For example, after the severe winter of 1996-97 and a cool 1997 spring, pheasant harvest increased 40% in Yakima County. In South Dakota, the wettest spring in history was 2007 (12+ inches of rain in May). The 2007, South Dakota pheasant harvest and hunter satisfaction was the highest in recent history. All upland game birds re-nest. Even the worst spring weather can provide excellent cover and insects for the late hatch.

A warm spring can provide good nesting cover and insect production for the early hatch, provided there is enough soil moisture. The weather in the Yakima Valley this past winter and spring has been warm and relatively dry. The early hatch pheasant, especially those near moist soil, should have done well. June has been very dry. Late hatch, especially those on drier sites, could be poor.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. YN conducts production and posts their data in late summer. For information on hunting the YN Reservation and their surveys, visit ynwildlife.org.

Released pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 2,000 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2014 allocation has not been set, but about 1000 birds are expected at the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 600 at Cottonwoods, and 400 at Whiskey Dick. For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. The local chapter of Pheasants Forever (PF) has been raising pheasant in “surrogators” and releasing at Sunnyside and on the YN Reservation. It is unclear how much surrogator birds contribute to harvest, but PF is increasing production in 2014.



QUAIL

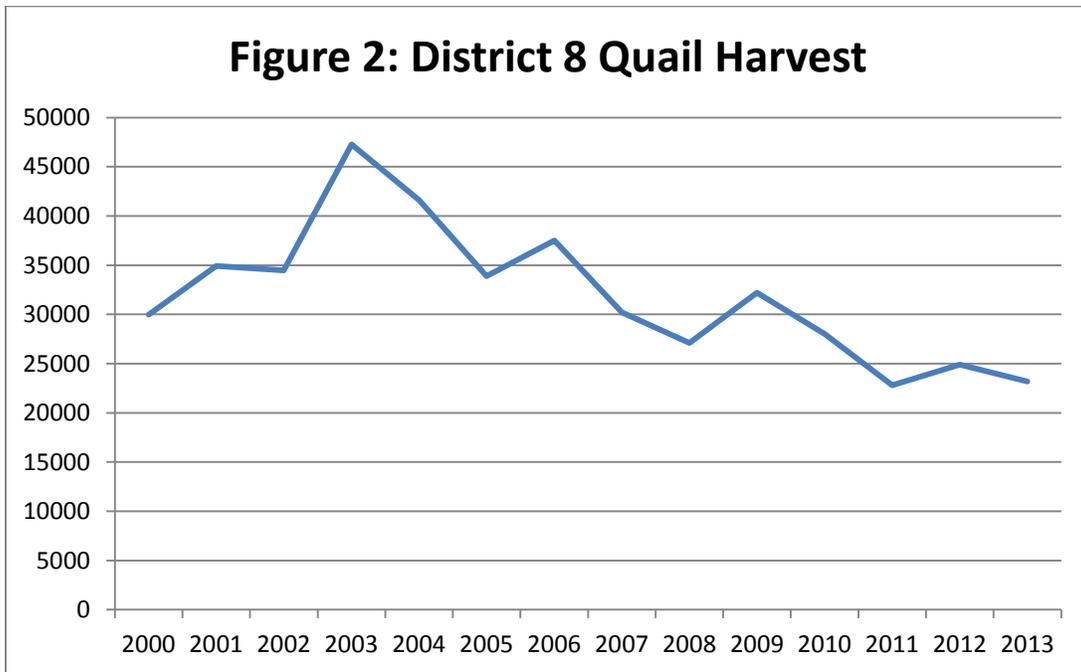
California Quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail can be found in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 24,000 birds over the last 5 years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 2,700.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 2). The trend may not represent actual quail populations as surveys on the YN Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds. Quail are often secondary to pheasant. The lack of pheasant and pheasant hunters might be contributing to the decline in total harvest. YN will post quail survey numbers later this summer.

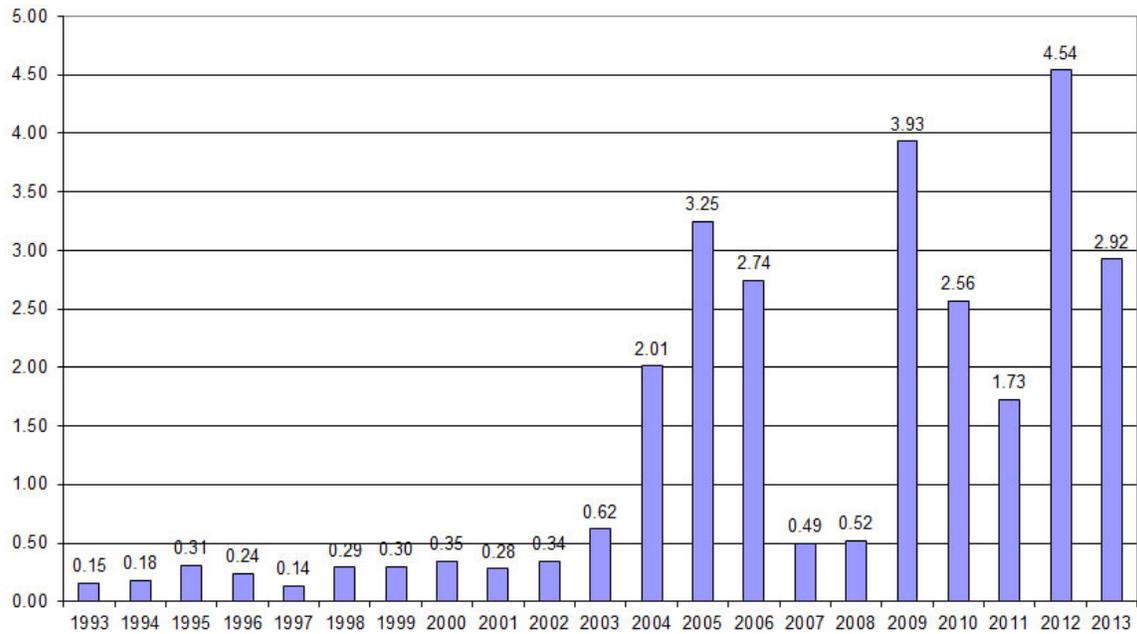
There has been no significant winter weather in the Yakima Valley to impact quail populations in over 15 years. Quail hatches are particularly hard to estimate based on weather. The best populations are along the Yakima River corridor. Even in the driest years, many nests can be wiped out by flood water due to mountain snowmelt in May-June. Quail are persistent re-nesters and will take advantage of the new vegetation and insect production once the river drops. It's not unusual to see good hatches in late August or early September.

In 2014, no floods occurred and the weather was warm and relatively dry. Early hatches may have been good, especially in areas with good riparian habitat. Quail in more arid locations might not have done as well.

WDFW owns various parcels along the Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area. YN runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunity. For information on hunting YN and their surveys, visit ynwildlife.org.

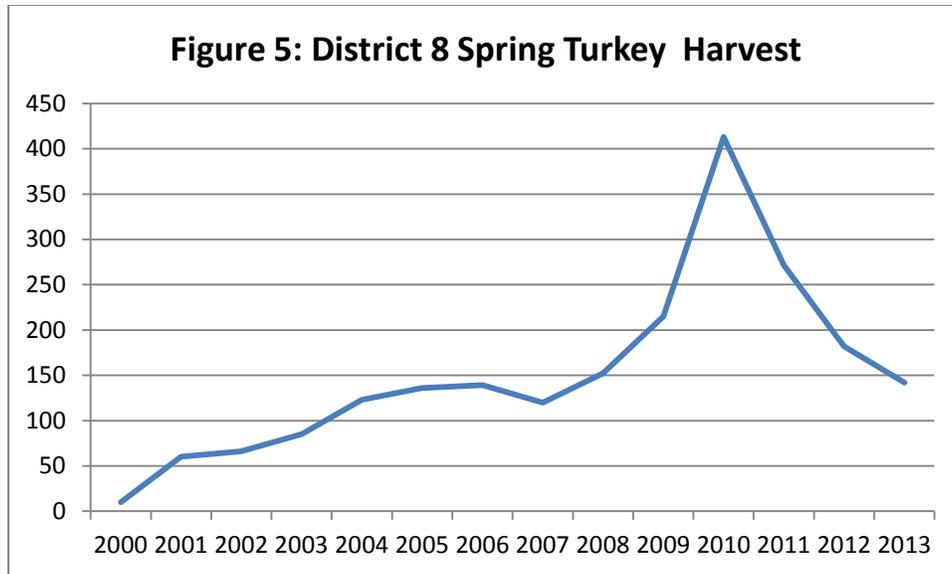


Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation



TURKEY

Turkey populations had been doing fairly well in the district following releases in the late 1990s, but now appear to be declining. It isn't unusual for newly established populations to reach high numbers, and then decline to a lower level. Most of the harvest in the district comes from the northern portion (GMU's 328 [Naneum], 329 [Quilomene], and 335 [Teaway]). The best populations early in the spring are on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teaway Community Forest.



PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in 2013 was relatively poor (Figure 3). No population surveys are conducted, but observations by partridge hunters suggest a downward trend the last few years. Winters have

been mild, yet partridge populations have been relatively poor the last few years. The exact reasons for the decline are unknown. Fires have probably reduced the quality of partridge habitat across District 8. Fires reduce nesting cover and the diversity of plants. The Yakima Training Center has had frequent fires the last 10 years. In 2013, 72,000 acres of partridge habitat burned on the Colockum and Quilomene Wildlife Areas in Kittitas Counties. Spring 2014 has been warm and dry with frequent fires in the Wenas wildlife area. The largest wildfire burned nearly 9,000 acres in June and fire season is ongoing. Expect more fires as the summer goes on, especially on YTC. Long term, the downward trend in partridge harvest will probably continue.

There is plenty of public land for partridge hunting in the district. The WDFW-managed Wenas, L.T. Murray, and Colockum Wildlife areas all have decent populations of birds. Huns can also be found on the Cowiche unit of the Oak Creek Wildlife Area. The Yakima Training Center (YTC) supports over 300,000 acres of potential partridge habitat. Chukar can also be found on east portions of the Oak Creek Wildlife Area.

YTC used to be a very popular spot for upland bird hunters. Decreased access due to military training and increased rules has limited the number of YTC upland bird hunters the last 5 years. Access to YTC in fall 2014 is unknown at this writing. Hunters must go through a brief orientation, pay a \$10 fee, and register their firearms with YTC. For more information on the orientation and rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

