

2015

JEFF BERNATOWICZ, District Wildlife Biologist



Washington  
Department of  
**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**



## DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas Counties

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## 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 the 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 freeway. 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 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest had increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. 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 season ends. As hunters have become less active, harvest had declined (Figure 1) and both the Yakima and Colockum herds are well over population objectives. Antlerless opportunity has been increasing, especially in the Colockum herd. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the season, away from open roads.

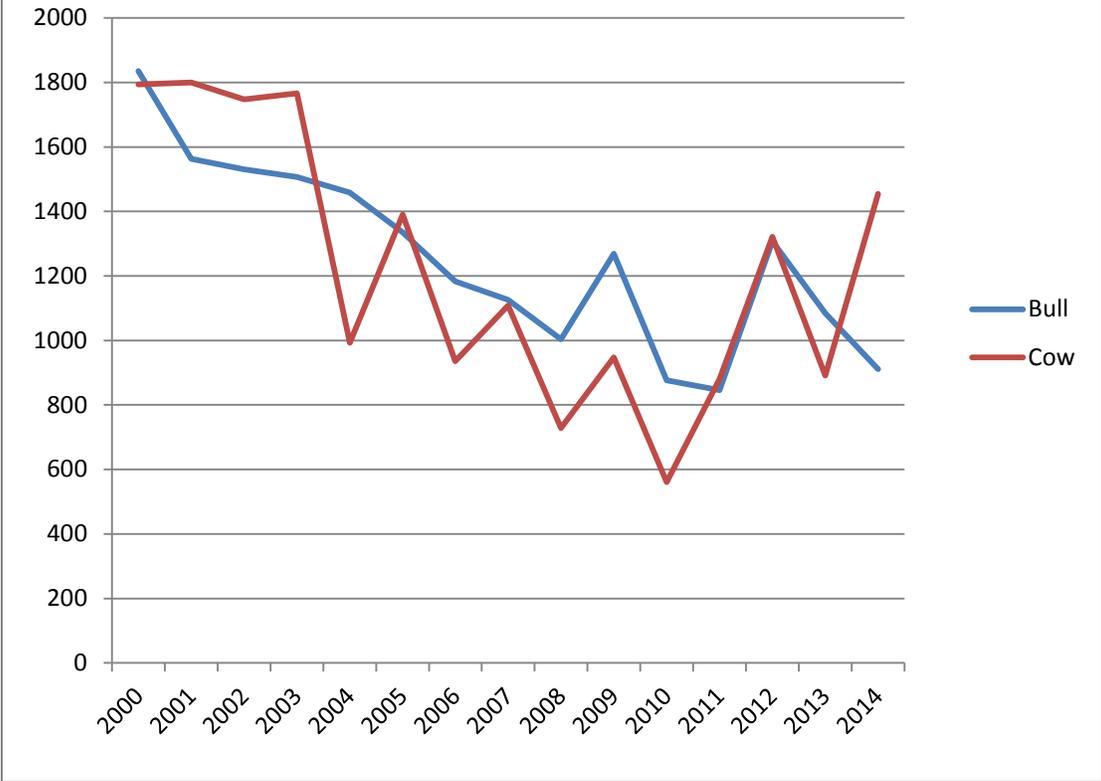
The winter of 2014-15 was very mild. Elk did not show up on feed sites or typical winter range areas in large numbers, so aerial surveys were not conducted in the Yakima area. There were fairly large numbers of elk going into the 2014 season and harvest was average. Elk populations are expected to be above average in 2015. Relatively high numbers of antlerless permits were issued for the 2015 season. New opportunities were added for youth, senior, and disabled hunters. Muzzleloader hunters have a high probability of drawing an antlerless permit. In 2015, there were more permits than applicants for youth antlerless muzzleloader. Archers should note GMUs 328 and 329 were added to the early season. Historically, archery success has been high in GMUs 328 and 329, and the elk population is at record levels. 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 elk category is the ultimate opportunity. That certainly applies to District 8, where the majority of quality elk permits are available in the south-central part of the state. 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 when they do draw a quality elk permit, they will already know the country. 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 make 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. The 2015 season will be about a week later than normal. The elk migration typically starts about November 3. The modern firearm season is Oct. 31 – Nov. 8, with youth and senior antlerless permits Nov. 4-15.

Although a few hunters seem to believe the elk have all moved to Mt. Rainer during the fall hunting season, the reality is that most of the 12,000 elk in the Yakima herd are in units open to hunting. Hunters will find them at higher elevations and away from roads. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.

**Figure 1: District 8 Elk Harvest**

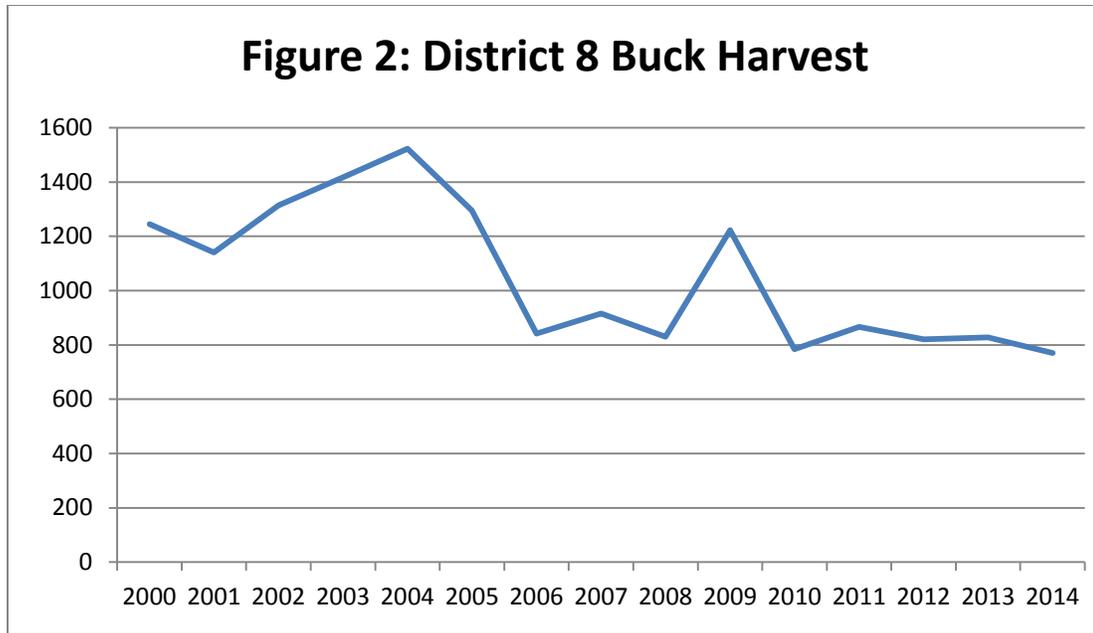


## DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 has been down from historic highs for a number of years. The average hunter success the last five years has been 8% compared to a statewide average of 28%. Following a sharp decline from 2004-2006, the harvest has been relatively static (Figure 2). There was no change in 2014. There have been mild winters and good fawn recruitment, and recent population surveys indicate the population is increasing, but non-tribal harvest has not increased. 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 set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teanaway), 340 (Manashtash), and 342 (Umtanum).



**WATERFOWL**

The USFWS flyway counts indicate 2015 breeding populations were the same as 2014 and 43% above the long term average. Mallard populations in the flyway were up 7% from 2014, and teal numbers were 19% higher. The prairie potholes were very dry, so ducks continued north into the boreal forest to nest. There is no data on production, but populations are expected to be good.

Yakima County has averaged over 31,000 ducks harvested the last five years, which is third best in the state. In 2014, harvest rebounded to near average levels in District 8 (Figure 3). While hunting was good in Yakima County, harvest in Kittitas County was low, probably due to Wanapum pool being closed the entire season.

Another El Nino winter is predicted for 2015, which usually means above average temperatures and duck numbers for District 8. The Boreal forest typically freezes early and there is less water available in the potholes. This could mean more birds arriving early in Washington.

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 (TPNWR). This is a drought year and water levels are very low. TPNWR has had difficulty filling wetlands in October, especially on the Pumphouse Unit. If the drought continues, most blinds could be dry in 2015. Before making a trip to TPNWR, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions. Hunting can be excellent when wetlands are filled.



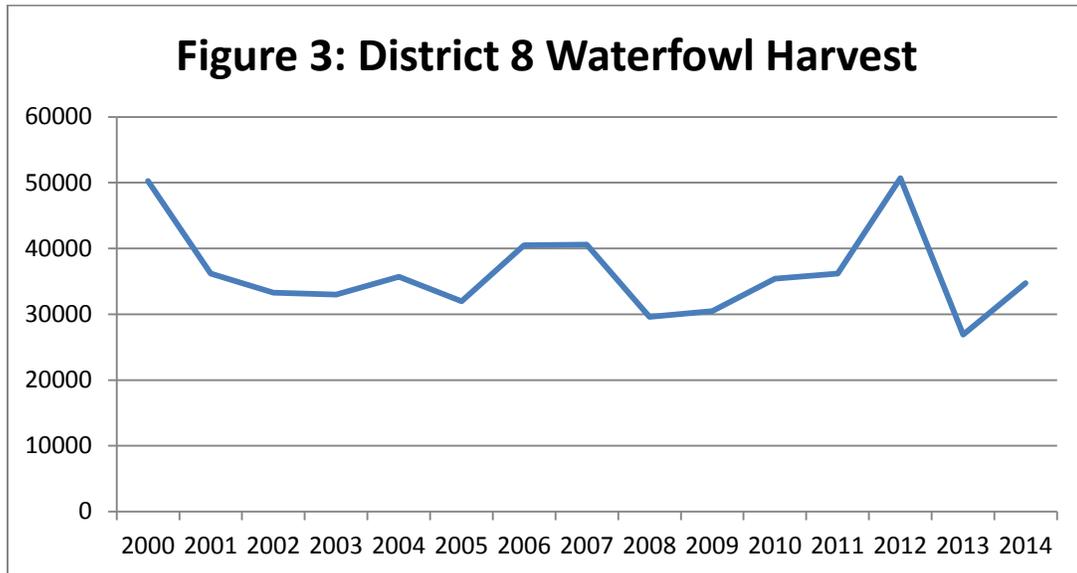
***Hunters may find “No water” signs at blind parking spots common in 2015 at TPNWR***

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 four birds per hunter opening weekend. The drought and low water level on the Yakima River has allowed YN to mow and open up more Satus wetlands than normal. The unknown will be river levels in fall. Water managers may be trying to fill reservoirs even if fall rains arrive. Watch for news releases about wetland conditions or check the YN website ([ynwildlife.org](http://ynwildlife.org)).

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early-mid season often sees good hunting on locally produced and migrant naïve birds. 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. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

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



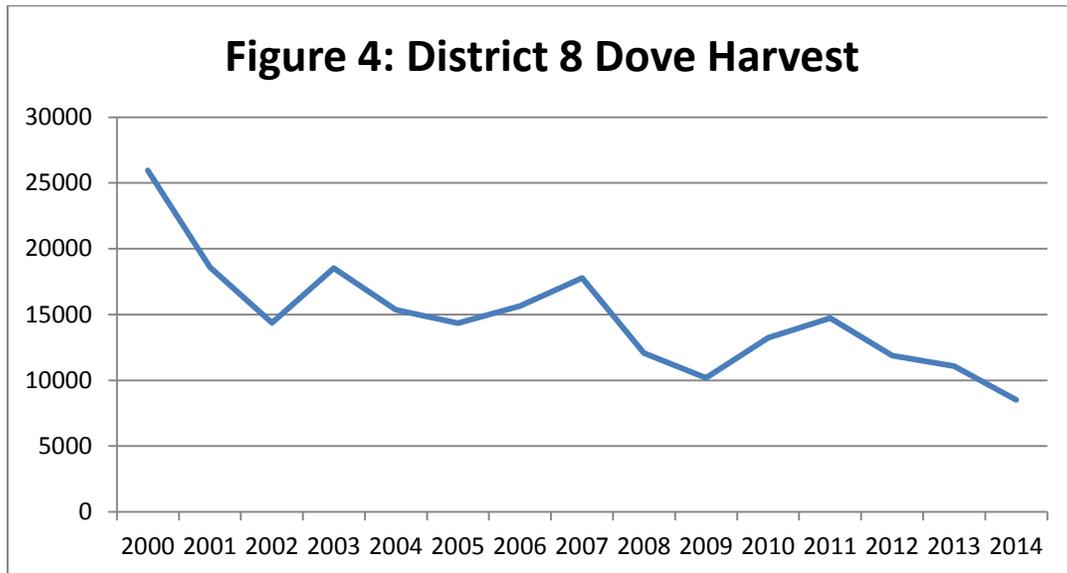
## DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second 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](http://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 by late August or early September. Despite a 30 day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves. Harvest and hunter numbers have been declining the last few years (Figure 4).

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 five 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 a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.



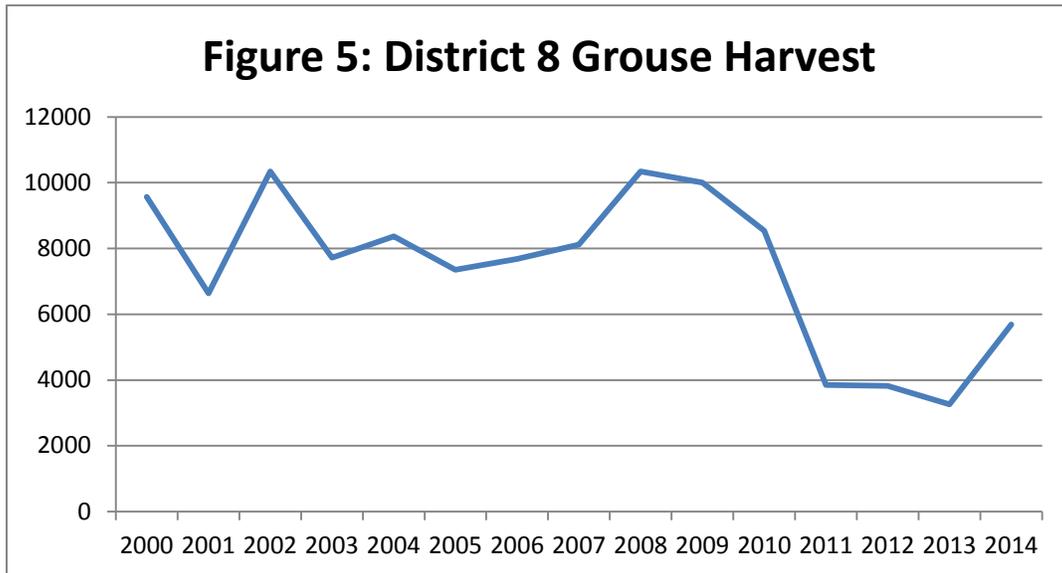
## FOREST GROUSE



The 2014 grouse harvest in District 8 increased slightly from the lowest in recent history (Figure 5). Hunters averaged 0.2 birds per day, but there were more hunters reporting hunting more days in 2014. No data is available on the 2014 hatch. The spring was warm and dry. Birds nesting in

higher elevations with access to moist meadows probably had higher nesting success than those in low, dry terrain.

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

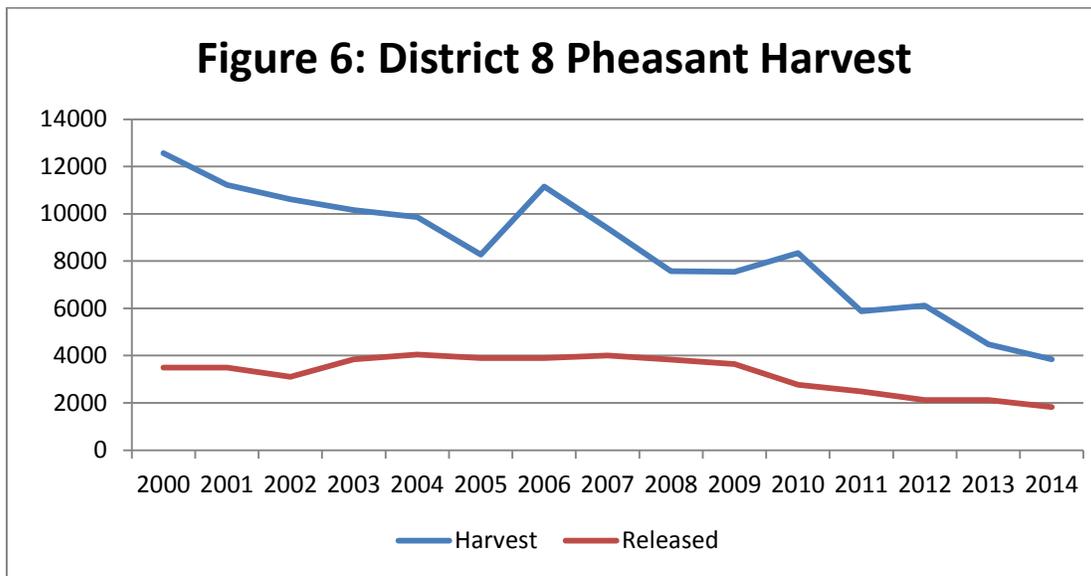
The 2014 pheasant harvest in District 8 was one of the lowest in recent history (Figure 6). There are very few wild pheasant in the district outside of the Yakima Valley on the Yakama Nation (YN) Reservation. The trend on the YN Reservation has been for declining pheasant populations due to conversion 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. 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. 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 dry. The early hatch pheasant, especially those near moist soil, should have done well. June and July were very hot and dry. There were also water restrictions and some canals went dry. The canals leak, creating moist areas for broods to find green vegetation and insects. Late hatch, especially those on drier sites, could be poor.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. YN conducts production surveys and posts their data in late summer. For information on hunting the YN Reservation and their surveys, visit [ynwildlife.org](http://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 2015 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. YN raised and released 3,000 birds over the summer. Research in Nebraska found only 12% of surrogator raised pheasant survived to hunting season, 3.5% were harvested, and only 1% survived one year. The surrogator raised birds will probably only modestly affect harvest and population.



## 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 five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 2,700.

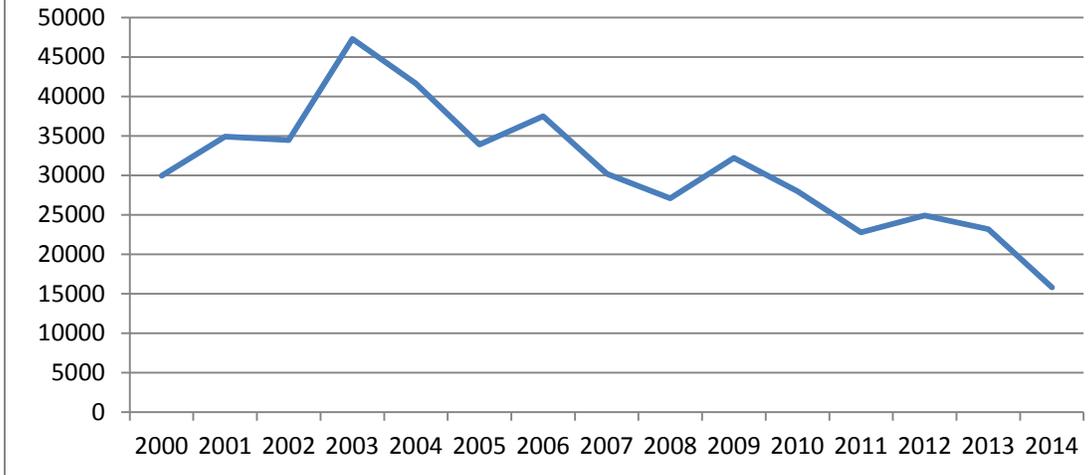
The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 7). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the YN Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds. Quail are often secondary quarry to pheasant hunters. The lack of pheasant and pheasant hunters might be contributing 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.

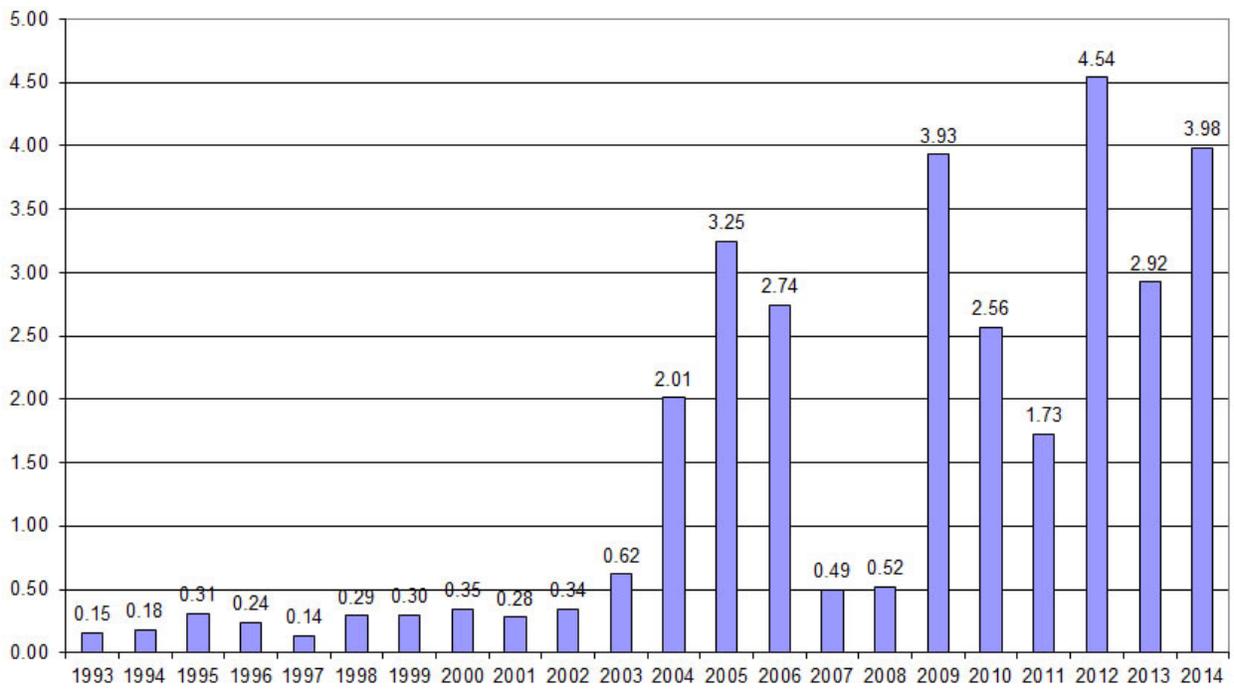
In 2015, no floods occurred, and the weather was warm and relatively dry. Hatches may have been good, especially in areas with good riparian habitat. Quail in more arid locations might not have done as well. There were long periods of time with temperatures exceeding 100<sup>0</sup> F. Birds can't sweat like humans or pant like dogs to cool off. Birds need shade and will reduce activity (i.e., feeding) in the heat.

WDFW owns various parcels along the Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail and 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](http://ynwildlife.org).

**Figure 7: District 8 Quail Harvest**



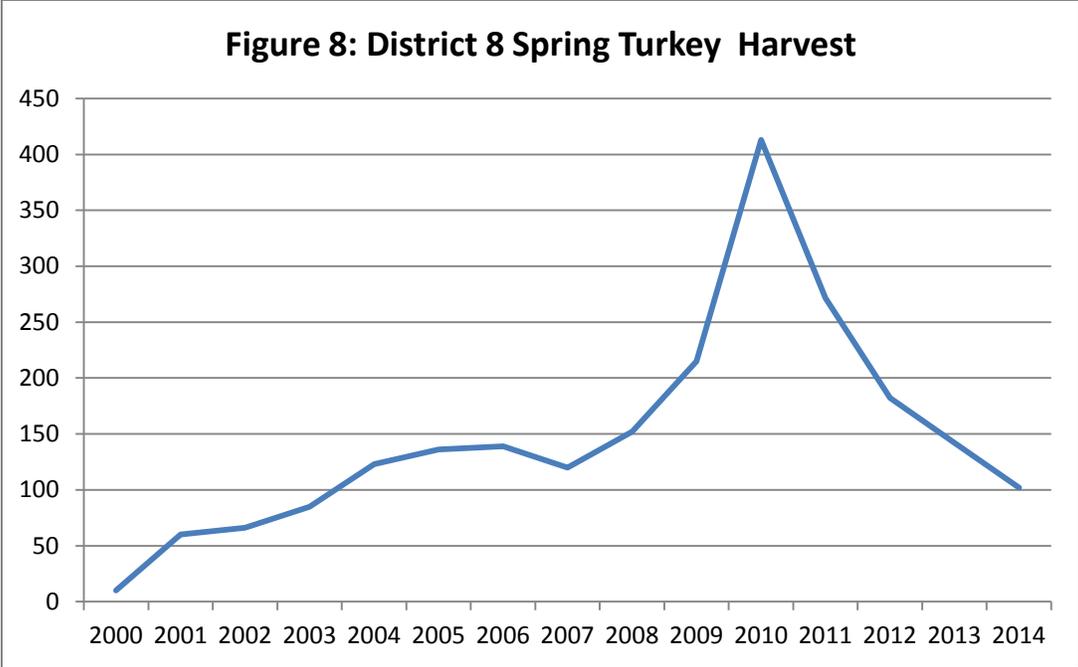
**Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation**



## TURKEY



Turkey populations had been doing fairly well in the district following releases in the late 1990s, but are now declining (Figure 8). It isn't unusual for newly established populations to reach high numbers before declining to a lower level. Most of the harvest in the district comes from the northern portion (GMUs 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 2014 was poor (Figure 9), especially in Yakima County. No population surveys are conducted, but observations by partridge hunters suggest low populations. Winters have been mild, but summers hot and dry. Partridge populations in District 8 typically increase with precipitation. The last few years have been very dry. The dry trend has continued in 2015.

Fires have also reduced the quality of partridge habitat across District 8. Fires reduce nesting cover and the diversity of plants. The Yakima Training Center (YTC) has had frequent fires the last ten years. In 2013, 72,000 acres of partridge habitat burned on the Colockum and Quilomene Wildlife Areas in Kittitas Counties. In 2014, over 38,000 acres burned on YTC and 9,000 acres on the Wenas Wildlife Area.

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 habitat for both Chukar and Hungarian partridge. Yakima Training Center (YTC) is over 300,000 acres of potential partridge habitat. Chukar can also be found on the eastern 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 restrictions has limited the number of YTC upland bird hunters the last five years. Access to YTC in fall 2015 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.

