2016

SCOTT FITKIN, District Wildlife Biologist
JEFF HEINLEN, Assistant District Wildlife Biologist

Washington Department of FISH and WILDLIFE

DISTRICT 6 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Okanogan County

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIRE CONDITIONS UPDATE

For the first time in three years, no significant fire activity exists in the district as of the end of July, and current conditions are less favorable for large fire development than in the last two seasons. Vegetation is generally recovering nicely in recently burned areas and game animals have returned to these portions of the district. In addition, access has been largely restored as well. However, recent intense thunderstorms have caused some road washouts in localized areas, particularly in places affected by recent fires. These washouts could limit access to some specific locations, particularly in the next few weeks. Check with land management agencies for more details.

For more information see:

- Okanogan National Forest, Methow Valley Ranger District
- Okanogan County Emergency Management

DISTRICT 6 GENERAL OVERVIEW

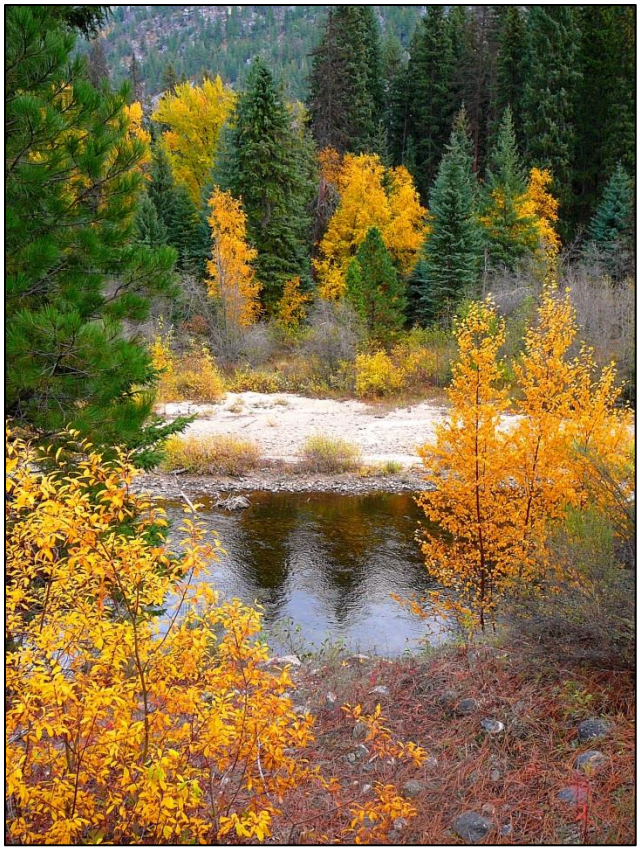
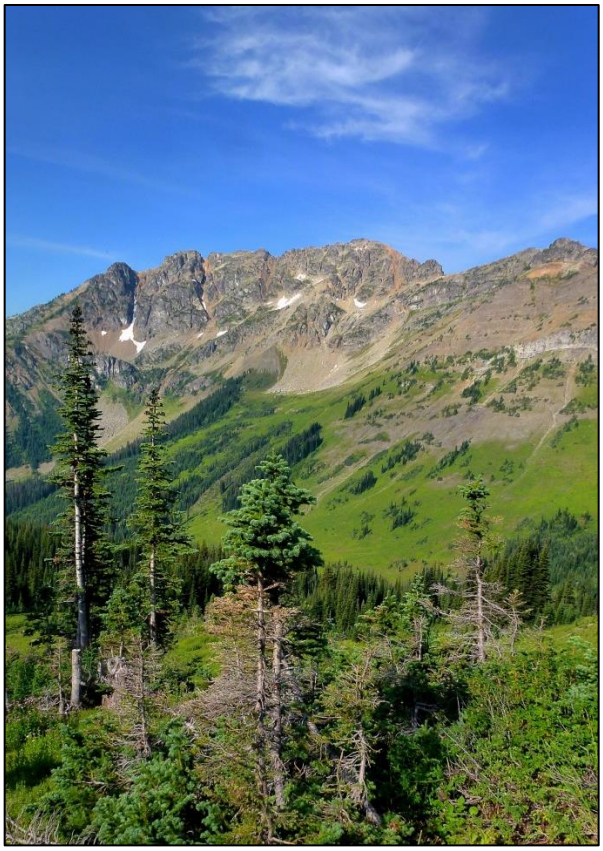
District 6 is located along the Canadian border in north-central Washington and encompasses ten game management units: 203 (Pasayten), 204 (Okanogan East), 209 (Wannacut), 215 (Sinlahekin), 218 (Chewuch), 224 (Perrygin), 231 (Gardner), 233 (Pogue), 239 (Chiliwist), and 242 (Alta).

The western two-thirds of the district, stretching from the Okanogan River to the Pacific Crest, lies on the east slope of the Cascade Range and is dominated by mountainous terrain that gets more rugged as you move from east to west. Vegetation in this portion of the district ranges from desert/shrub-steppe at the lowest elevations to various types of conifer forests, culminating in alpine tundra on the higher peaks, which top out at almost 9,000 feet. More than three-quarters of the land base in this portion of the county is in public ownership, offering extensive hunting access. Game is plentiful and dispersed throughout the area for most of the year, concentrating in the lower elevations in winter when deep snows cover much of the landscape.

GMU 204 includes the eastern one-third of the district (from the Okanogan River east to the Okanogan County line) and is moderately rolling terrain, generally rising in elevation as you move east. The vegetation changes from shrub-steppe near the Okanogan River to a mix of tall grass and conifer forest throughout the remainder of the unit. This portion of the district is roughly a 50-50 patchwork of public and private land, with the public lands generally being higher in elevation. Again, game is plentiful and dispersed throughout.

Weather in the Okanogan District can be quite variable and capable of changing quickly in the fall. Be prepared for everything from warm, sunny days to the possibility of winter temperatures and significant snow at higher elevations by the second week of October.

Please be respectful of private land and treat landowners and their property the way you would want to be treated if roles were reversed.

Chewuch River and Pasayten Wilderness – Photos by Scott Fitkin

Agency biologists will run a biological check and information station at the Red Barn in Winthrop both weekends of the modern firearm general deer season. We encourage hunters to stop and provide data to biologists whether they've harvested a deer or not. Data collected assists in assessing herd health and shaping population management.

ELK

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Elk numbers are generally low in District 6. However, conditions vary noticeably between the east and west portions of Okanogan County. The western two-thirds of the district are not currently covered under a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) elk herd management plan, and the existing harvest strategy (any elk general season) is designed to minimize elk numbers to prevent agricultural damage and avoid competition with the large migratory mule deer herd. As such, elk are quite scarce west of the Okanogan River and very difficult to find without extensive local knowledge.

The eastern portion of the district (GMU 204) is covered by the Selkirk Elk Herd Plan. It's four primary goals are: (1) to preserve, protect, perpetuate, manage, and enhance elk and their habitats to ensure healthy, productive populations and ecosystem integrity, (2) to manage this elk herd for

a sustained hunting yield, (3) to manage elk for a variety of recreational, educational, and aesthetic purposes, including hunting, scientific study, cultural and ceremonial uses by Native Americans, biodiversity, wildlife viewing, and photography, and (4) to manage elk and elk habitat to minimize human conflicts and agricultural damage. More specifically, GMU 204 supports part of the Pend Oreille sub-herd population, where the current management objective is to gradually increase elk numbers while addressing the above four goals. As a result, this unit is now managed with an any bull harvest during general seasons. Elk are not currently abundant enough to warrant a survey effort in District 6, but anecdotal observations suggest numbers are increasing noticeably in GMU 204.

2015 District 6 Elk Harvest Statistics: District 6 General Season Elk Harvest

WHICH GMU SHOULD ELK HUNTERS HUNT?

As noted above, GMU 204 is the only GMU in District 6 with a significant number of elk. Unless you have up-to-date knowledge on one of the few small bands of elk in the rest of the district (generally limited to local hunters who frequently scout), finding an animal in those GMUs is extremely difficult.

NOTABLE HUNTING CHANGES

GMU 204 has been added to the early archery general season, and muzzleloader opportunity in GMU 204 has been removed from the late season and added to the early season. These changes are designed to shift hunting pressure to earlier in the fall when elk are more likely to be in areas where conflicts with agriculture could arise. This also makes the seasons consistent with neighboring GMU 101, where management objectives are similar.

DEER

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

District 6 supports perhaps the largest migratory mule deer herd in the state and Okanogan County has long been prized by hunters for its mule deer hunting. The district also supports significant numbers of white-tailed deer, particularly in GMUs 204 and 215. Generally, the District 6 deer management objective is for a stable to modestly increasing population within the social tolerance limits for nuisance and damage issues.

Okanogan District mule deer and white-tailed deer – Photos by Scott Fitkin

However, GMUs 204, 224, 233, 239, and 242 are currently being managed in the short-term for stable to slightly decreasing populations in response to the landscape's reduced ability to support deer in the wake of the huge landscape level fires of the last two summers. The fire burned huge tracts of critical winter shrub forage. Managing browsing pressure will be important to winter range recovery and the long-term health of the herd.

Despite the massive fires, district deer populations are doing fine, thanks in part to greater than normal fall green-up and a mild winter in 2014-15, and near-average fawn recruitment over the last two winters combined. In addition, post-season sex ratios in December of 2015 remained good at 16 bucks per 100 does.

WHICH GMU SHOULD DEER HUNTERS HUNT?

With the possible exception of GMU 209, all units in District 6 support significant numbers of deer, include large blocks of accessible public land, and offer good to excellent deer hunting opportunity. GMU 209 is the driest unit overall and has the highest percentage of private land, so general season opportunities are more modest in this area. Mule deer are abundant throughout the county, with the highest densities occurring in the Methow Valley and along the divide between the Methow and Okanogan Watersheds.

Overall, white-tailed deer are less numerous than mule deer in Okanogan County, and in contrast to mule deer, white-tail abundance generally increases as you move east in the district. The

largest population is in GMU 204, where whitetails comprise about half of the overall deer population in Sinlahekin Valley and surrounding drainages. Although white-tailed deer numbers are less abundant in the western portion of the district, they are still found in most all drainages up to mid-elevations, particularly those with significant riparian vegetation. In many areas west of GMU 204 and outside of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, white-tailed deer frequent private lands. Prospective hunters wishing to target white-tailed deer may want to seek permission in advance of the season to access individual ownerships.

General season hunters harvested 3,603 deer from the ten game management units comprising District 6. This is the highest total in over 20 years, and represents an increase of 30% over the 2014 season despite the disruptive effects of the fires. The overall general season success rate improved as well, and broke out as follows: Modern – 26%, Muzzleloader – 25%, Archery – 35%, and Multi-season – 32%.

GMU 204 (the district's largest unit) yielded the greatest overall general season deer harvest of 866 animals. In the western portion of the district, GMUs 215, 218, 224 combined to produce a harvest of 1514 animals, accounting for 42% of the total number of deer taken in District 6.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Deer Harvest Statistics: District 6 General Season Deer Harvest

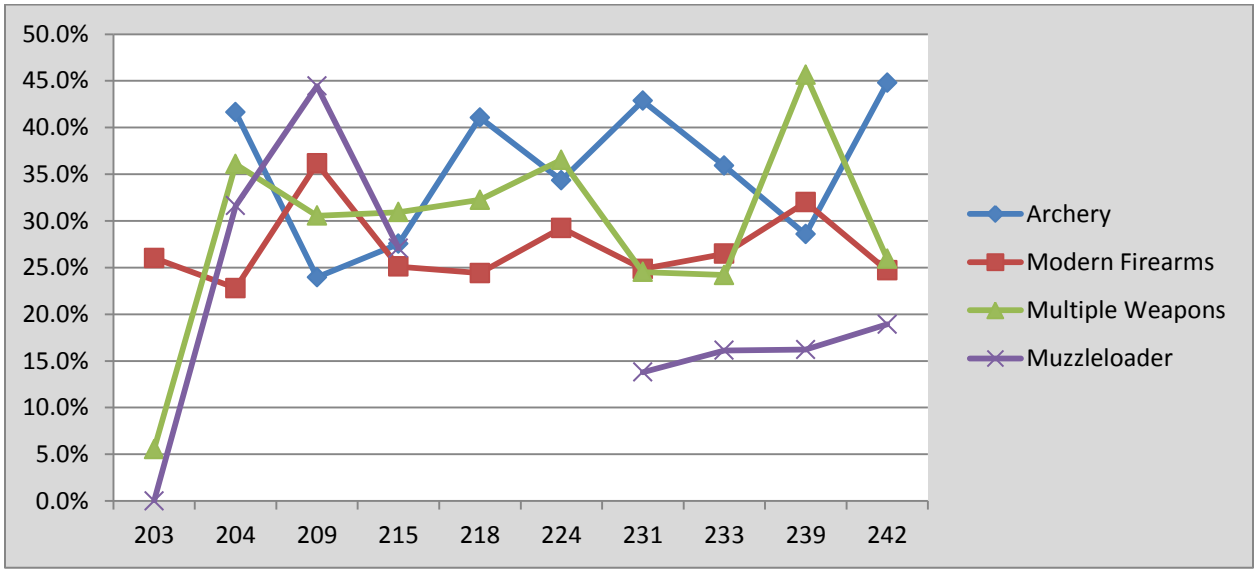


Figure 1. District 6 2015 general season hunter success by weapon type and GMU.

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2016 SEASON

Prospects for mule deer look favorable this year, although harvest will likely be lower than last season's 20+ year high. Better than average recruitment in 2015 should translate into a good crop of available 2.5 year-old bucks, and observed escapement of 16 bucks per 100 does last December means hunters should have decent opportunities to harvest older age class bucks. The end date for the general modern firearm season is late again this year, so mule deer may begin migrating toward winter range (southerly facing slopes at lower elevations) during the later

portion of that season. If so, this will start to concentrate deer in more accessible areas and improve hunters' chances of locating legal bucks.

Unlike the last two years, District 6 has experienced minimal fire activity this summer and no major fire-related access closures are in place at this time. In addition, it looks unlikely that hunters will experience the exceptionally hot and dry conditions that existed last year, but make sure to check with local agencies on current conditions and fire restrictions before beginning your hunt.

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT MULE DEER

During the early general seasons, deer will be widely distributed on the landscape and not yet concentrated in migration areas or on winter range. The one possible exception could be the tail end of the general modern firearm season, as mentioned above. Mature bucks in particular are often at high elevations in remote locations as long as succulent vegetation is available. In general, older, higher elevation burns, including the Tripod, Thirty-mile, Farewell, and Needles Fires, are producing high quality summer forage and are a good bet for significant deer activity.

During the late permit seasons, the majority of deer will have moved to winter range areas at lower elevations on more southerly slopes. In District 6, WDFW wildlife areas and immediately adjacent federal lands are good bets for high deer numbers in late fall, although in low snow years, some mature bucks may linger at higher elevations.

Although mule deer will use a variety of habitat types, they will often forage well into fairly open environments, particularly at dawn and dusk. As a result, they can often be glassed and stalked from considerable distance.

HOW TO FIND AND HUNT WHITE-TAILED DEER

White-tailed deer are typically far less migratory than mule deer and generally favor brushier country with denser cover. Look for white-tails along stream drainages and in other areas with riparian vegetation or thick cover. Like mule deer, white-tails are most active at dawn and dusk, but often don't venture as far into larger openings unless under the cover of darkness. Look for white-tails in edge habitats where denser cover abruptly transitions into more open meadows. Many white-tail hunters will wait patiently at a stationary position along an obvious game trail or the forest edge, often employing the use of a blind or tree stand.

DEER AREAS

For those hunters with second deer permits in Deer Areas 2012 -2016, remember that those permits are good only on private land. Permit holders are responsible for making contact with private land owners to secure hunting access.

NOTABLE HUNTING CHANGES

Baiting for deer and elk is now more tightly regulated in accordance with WAC 232-12-245. See page 86 of the 2016 Big Game regulations for details. The late general archery season for white-tails in GMUs 204 and 209 has been shortened and moved earlier to Nov 21-30, in large part to mitigate for stressed placed on animals by last year's fires. Higher than average numbers

of antlerless special permits are again being issued for traditional hunts in those GMUs affected by the Carlton Complex and Okanogan Complex Fires.

BLACK BEAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

Black bears are abundant and well distributed throughout District 6 and are managed for sustainable harvest and diverse age structure. Monitored demographic parameters suggest the local population and associated harvest appear to be relatively stable, so hunting prospects in the district should be good.

For hunters pursuing black bear in the northern Cascades, it is critical to positively identify the bear species, as endangered grizzly bears potentially also inhabit these areas. WDFW's website features some interactive training materials on how to tell the difference between black and grizzly bears. Click here to view the Interactive Bear Identification Program and take the Bear Identification Test.

WHICH GMU SHOULD BEAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All GMUs in the Okanogan District provide good black bear hunting opportunity. In 2015, hunters harvested 103 black bears from the western portion of the district in the Okanogan Bear Management Unit (BMU 5). This was up about 10% over the 2013 tally. Last year, bears wandered widely to find patchy robust berry crops during an exceptionally dry year, and the harvest was spread accordingly across all GMUs. GMU 204 in the Northeastern BMU yielded 48 animals, down from 60 the year before, but surprisingly productive given the hunting disruptions caused by the Tunk Block Fires.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Black Bear Harvest Statistics:

- Okanogan BMU Black Bear Harvest
- Northeastern BMU Black Bear Harvest

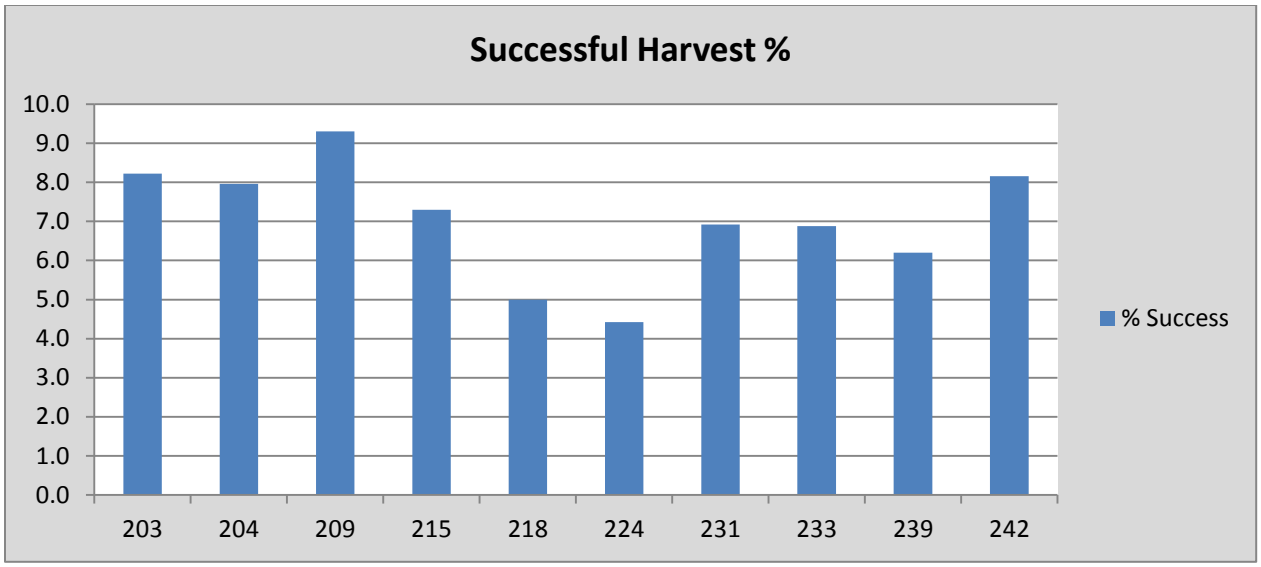


Figure 2. Okanogan District 5-year average black bear harvest success rates by GMU.

Okanogan District black bear – Photo by Scott Fitkin

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING THE 2016 SEASON

At the beginning of bear season, animals are likely to be found at middle elevations in wetter areas where berries are peaking. As the season progresses, expect bears to follow the ripening berries to higher elevations. As we move into fall, animals will range over a wider elevational gradient to take advantage of a variety of late season food sources.

COUGAR

GENERAL INFORMATION, MANAGEMENT GOALS, AND POPULATION STATUS

The District 6 cougar population is healthy and well distributed across the landscape. In the Okanogan District, cougars are now managed by a harvest guideline at the individual GMU level to better promote stable population structure and high quality sustainable harvest, while also minimizing human-cougar conflicts.

Cougar with kitten – Photo by Scott Fitkin

Cougars follow the deer herds, which means they will be spread throughout the district through late October and then start to concentrate more at lower elevations as deer move to winter range. Much cougar foraging activity takes place at night, so the best opportunities to spot the cats on the move are at dawn and dusk.

WHICH GMU SHOULD COUGAR HUNTERS HUNT?

All Okanogan District GMUs support cougars and are open to hunting. After January 1, individual PMUs (one or more GMUs) close on short notice once the harvest guideline has been reached, and hunters are responsible for knowing if a unit is open or closed. This information is available on the WDFW hotline (1-866-364-4868) or online.

Last season, harvest fell slightly short of the guidelines in several GMUs, and control-related mortality remained modest. As a result, cougar numbers should be robust and hunting opportunities in District 6 should be good in 2015-16. A summary table of the harvest guideline by PMU is presented below.

For more information, see the 2015-2016 District 6 Cougar Harvest Statistics: State-wide cougar harvest by PMU.

PMU Hunt Area (GMUs)	Harvest Guideline	2012-2013 Harvest	2013-2014 Harvest	2014-2015 Harvest	2015-2016 Harvest
203	4-6	0	0	0	0
204	6-8	5	5	1	7
209, 215	3-5	3	2	4	5
218, 231	4-6	2	3	2	2
224	2-3	1	2	1	1
233,239	3-4	2	0	1	3
242,243	6-7	4	4	3	4

Table 1. District 6 cougar harvest guidelines and 3-year harvest by GMU.

WATERFOWL

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Okanogan District offers modest waterfowl hunting opportunities as compared to many other areas of the state. The largest concentrations of birds occur at the southern edge of District 6, at the mouth of the Okanogan River and on the Columbia River. The main stem of the Okanogan and Upper Similkameen Rivers and the larger lakes and potholes in the Okanogan Watershed are good secondary sites. Good public river access can be found at the Washburn Island Unit of the Wells Wildlife Area, the Driscoll-Eyhott Island Unit of the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, and the Similkameen-Chopaka Unit of the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area.

Barrows golden eye pair – Photo by Scott Fitkin

Canada geese in a Methow Valley grain field – Photo by Scott Fitkin

Water levels in local potholes are likely to be much improved over last year's drought conditions. River levels are currently running about normal and are likely to remain close to average going into the hunting season. Aside from water levels, waterfowl hunting opportunities are mostly dependent on the number of migrants coming from Canada and Alaska and how long water remains ice-free throughout the district.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Waterfowl Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest

FOREST GROUSE

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

The Okanogan supports strong populations of ruffed, dusky (blue), and spruce grouse, which are found throughout the forested areas of the district. Ruffed grouse are generally associated with deciduous tree cover at lower to middle elevations, particularly in riparian habitats. During hunting season, dusky (blue) grouse are generally found in the mid to upper elevation conifer forests, often moving to ridges as snow begins to accumulate. Spruce grouse are located in higher elevation conifer forests throughout the district on a year-round basis.

Forest grouse populations are likely below historical norms within the boundaries of recent wildfires, including the massive Carlton Complex, Okanogan Complex, Tunk Block, and Tripod fires. These fires burned in some of the best and most densely occupied forest grouse habitat in the district. However, grouse habitat within the burns is improving annually (particularly in the Tripod Fire area), and bird numbers outside of burned areas appear to be relatively stable.

HARVEST TRENDS AND 2016 PROSPECTS

Despite the lingering effects of recent wild fires, sprawling Okanogan yielded a mixed harvest of 8,340 dusky, ruffed, and spruce grouse, up 11% over last year despite reduced hunter numbers. Similarly, grouse harvest per unit effort increased by 21% in 2015. We do not have an effective way to comprehensively survey grouse in District 6. However, anecdotal observations suggest 2016 should be a fairly average year for grouse hunting opportunity. The number of displaying dusky grouse in the spring appeared to be down somewhat, but spruce grouse production appears to have been strong throughout their range in Okanogan County.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Forest Grouse Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest .

Male dusky grouse and female spruce grouse – Photos by Scott Fitkin

PHEASANTS

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Pheasants occur at low densities and in a patchy distribution throughout the Okanogan Watershed portion of District 6, with the majority of harvested birds coming from pheasant release sites. This year, pheasants will again be released at traditional sites on the Driscoll Island and Chilliwist units of the Sinlaken Creek Wildlife Areas. What little wild production exists within the county comes mostly from private land. Hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private property.

The release sites are mapped on the GoHunt website. Hunters are reminded that nontoxic shot is required for ALL upland bird hunting on ALL pheasant release sites statewide.

Hunters bagged 846 pheasants last year in Okanogan County. This harvest level was back up to the five-year average and harvest per unit effort actually rebounded well above the average after the fire-restricted season of 2014.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Pheasant Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest

Pheasant release – Photo by WDFW

QUAIL

SPECIES AND GENERAL HABITAT CHARACTERISTICS

Quail are locally abundant and widespread throughout the district's lower elevation shrub-steppe and open pine forest habitats. District 6 wildlife areas offer good access to quail habitat. Anecdotal observations this spring and summer suggest quail production has been good this year, with some birds having multiple clutches, suggesting 2016 harvest opportunities may be similar to last year. In 2015, hunters took 8663 quail in Okanogan County, with both harvest and harvest per unit effort well above the 5-year average.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Quail Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest

TURKEYS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Turkeys are found in scattered groups throughout the district and often concentrate on private land near agriculture areas. Prospective hunters should seek permission in advance of the season to access private land. The fall turkey permit season occurs within GMUs 218-231 and 242, with the majority of the birds being located in the latter two units. In recent years, winter conditions and declines in supplemental feeding by private individuals have reduced turkey numbers substantially in the Methow Valley, although most lower-elevation drainages in GMU 242 still harbor birds.

CHUKAR AND GRAY PARTRIDGE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In general, gray partridge populations are widely distributed and patchy throughout the district's shrub steppe habitats, but appear to be increasing in numbers and distribution over time. Birds are seen frequently on the Indian Dan, Chiliwist, and Methow wildlife areas. Scattered groups of chukars are found in the rocky areas in lower elevations of District 6. The steep hills along the Similkameen River in the north part of the Okanogan Valley hold good numbers of birds.

Combined harvest of chukar and gray partridge in 2015 rebounded significantly after the fire-desrupted season of 2014. We are expecting bird numbers in 2016 to be similar to last year.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Partridge Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest.

DOVE

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Once again, a large portion of the dove habitat in the Okanogan District burned in 2015, yet dove harvest rose as compared to 2014. Vegetation has responded vigorously in much of the burn areas of the last two years, making the outlook for doves even better in 2016. Look for doves in planted food crops in the Sinlahekin and at lower elevations on other public land. Hunting success will depend on warm weather keeping the birds in the area through the season.

For more information, see the 2015 District 6 Mourning Dove Harvest Statistics: Okanogan County Small Game Harvest.