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**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**



## DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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## DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is in southcentral Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include: 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teaaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtanum), 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 shrubsteppe and farmland, to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is best known for great elk hunting. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with more than 11,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are about 4,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which mostly inhabits public land north of Ellensburg.

The public land provides plenty of upland bird hunting opportunities in District 8, but populations have fallen on hard times and aren't likely to rebound. Wild pheasant are almost extinct and almost all species has declined to at or near historic lows. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas have many options in District 8. 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 I-90. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which utilizes a Hunt by Reservation system. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, partridge, quail, and pheasant on the same day.

Turkeys were introduced over 40 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Populations in GMU 335 (Teaaway) 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 turkey hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in Washington. While it is still challenging to draw a permit to hunt sheep, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip in District 8. Rams are in rut from 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



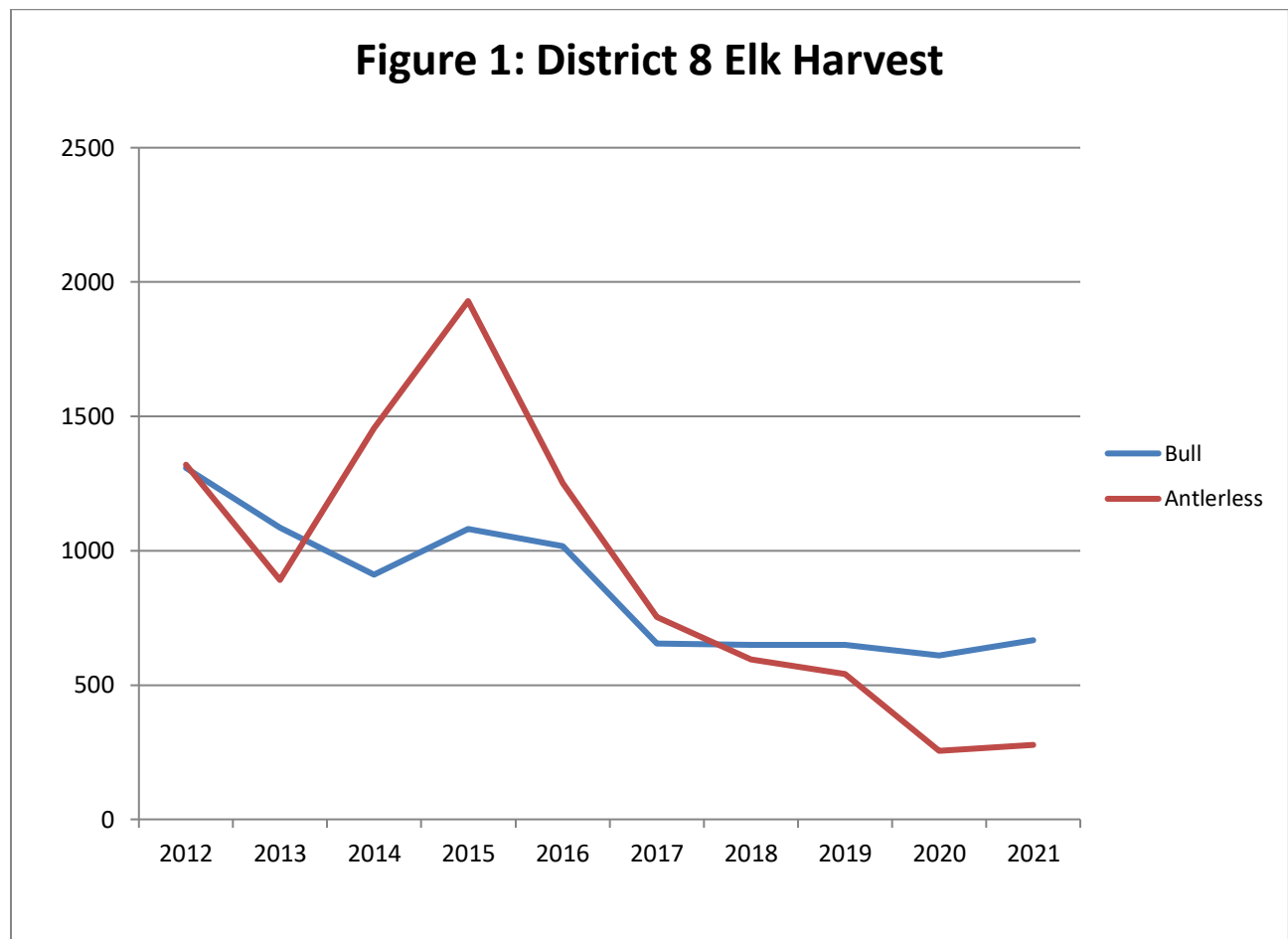
District 8 used to be one of the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction came relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader.

The only antlerless archery general seasons are now in GMUs 334, 335, and 371. GMUs 334 and 335 are managed for minimal numbers of elk due to adjacent agriculture. Elk Area 3911 covers all GMU 334 and the lower portions of GMU 335 where most elk in these units reside. Master Hunters are allowed to harvest antlerless elk using modern firearms from Aug. 1, 2022–Jan. 20, 2023, in 3911, so any archery hunters hunting in Elk Area 3911 should be aware they are required to wear hunter orange. In 2021, archers harvested 14 antlerless elk from GMU 335 and no elk in GMU 334. GMU 371 is open terrain but has good numbers of elk. Access to GMU 371 changes with military training.

Both the Yakima and Colockum elk herds had been below management objectives due to poor recruitment. Surveys this past winter found the Yakima herd had in theory increase by 3,000 elk. There is some concern on the accuracy of this number because, harvest since 2017 has

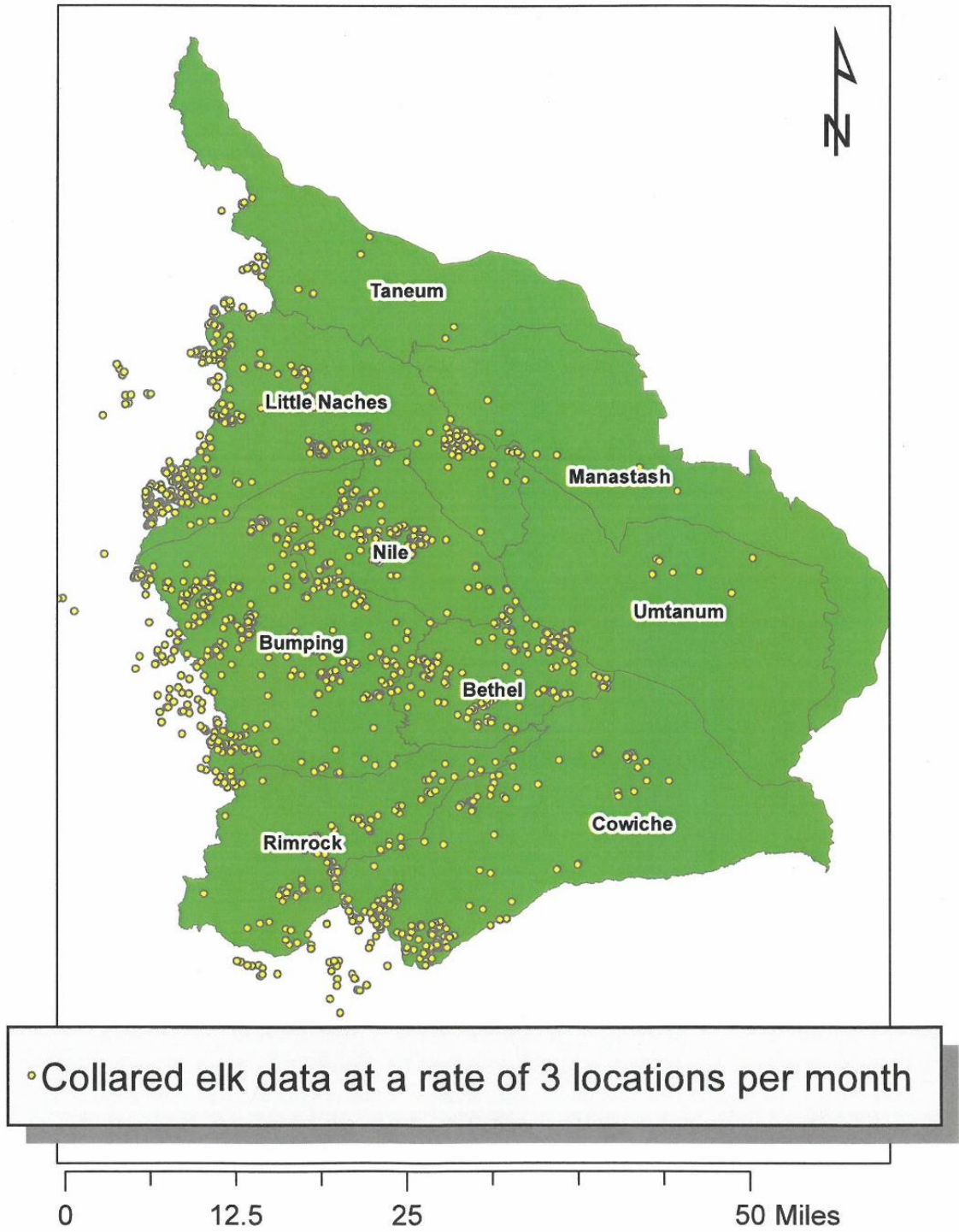
remained flat. Historically, there has been a very strong correlation between calves seen on winter range and yearling bull harvest the following season. If the Yakima herd has really increased, there should be a corresponding increase in yearling bull harvest. The Colockum herd was not surveyed in 2021, but calf recruitment did increase in the Yakima Herd. If the surveys were accurate, spike harvest should be near 2012-14 levels (Figure 1, Table 1). There should be more spikes available for harvest.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October of 2021, whereas Figure 3 is from a recent study on Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads once seasons begin. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide some of the better opportunities in the district for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country away from roads.



**Table 1: District 8 General Season Elk Harvest Average 2019-21**

<b>GMU</b>	<b>Antlerless</b>	<b>Antlered</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Hunters</b>	<b>Success</b>
<b>328</b>	53	80	132	2752	5%
<b>329</b>	20	69	89	1452	6%
<b>334</b>	7	3	11	316	3%
<b>335</b>	19	9	28	858	3%
<b>336</b>	8	26	34	941	4%
<b>340</b>	4	54	59	1891	3%
<b>342</b>	5	38	43	1252	3%
<b>346</b>	3	51	54	1471	4%
<b>352</b>	12	15	27	855	3%
<b>356</b>	7	30	37	827	4%
<b>360</b>	0	41	41	1073	4%
<b>364</b>	7	27	34	999	3%
<b>368</b>	20	86	107	1619	7%
<b>371</b>	34	1	35	88	40%
<b>Total</b>	198	531	729	16396	4%



**Figure 2.** A sample of Yakima Elk Herd's Fall Distribution from 140 collared females during Sept. and Oct. 2004-2006



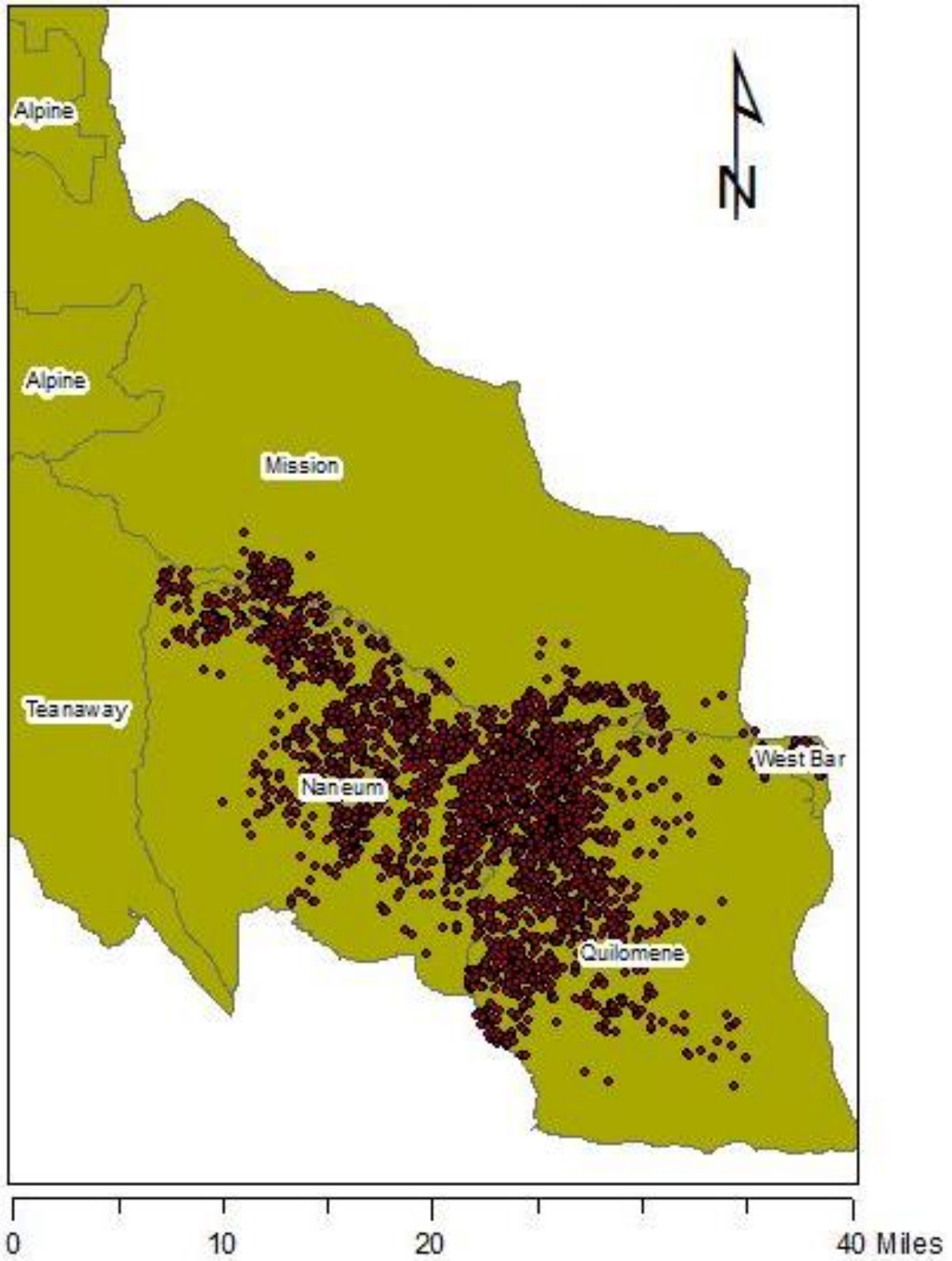


Figure 3. Colockum Elk Herd, collared female locations during September and October



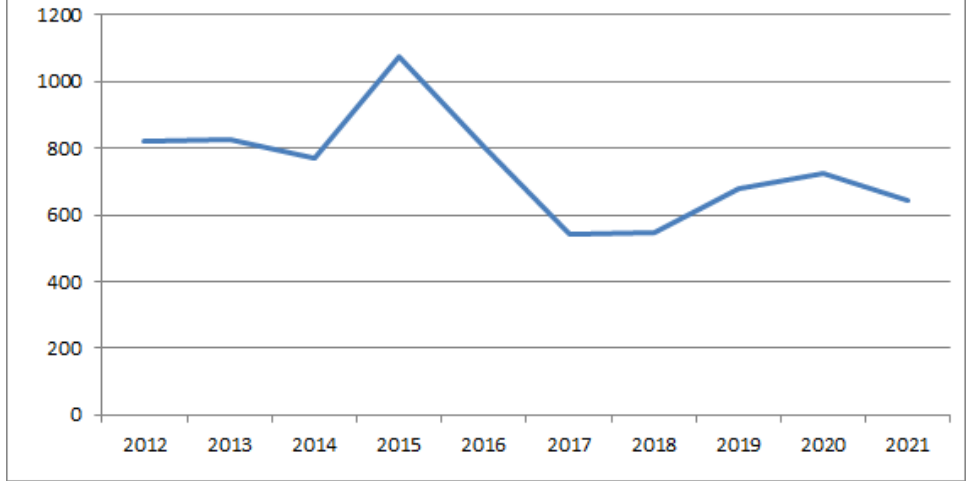
## DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 hit its lowest levels in 2017-2018 and has since rebounded slightly (Figure 4). The average general season hunter's success is about 7% compared to a statewide average of 23%. The 2022 harvest is hard to predict. Last winter was harder than most, but mortality on radioed collared deer from starvation was not high. Harvest and hunter numbers by GMU for the last three years are shown in Table 2.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters now 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 (Teaway), 328 (Naneum), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

**Figure 4: District 8 Buck Harvest**



<b>GMU</b>	<b>Buck Harvest</b>	<b>Hunters</b>	<b>Success</b>
<b>328</b>	122	1297	9%
<b>330</b>	4	18	24%
<b>334</b>	33	292	11%
<b>335</b>	198	1588	12%
<b>336</b>	47	741	6%
<b>340</b>	66	868	8%
<b>342</b>	84	998	8%
<b>346</b>	23	708	3%
<b>352</b>	15	443	3%
<b>356</b>	5	206	2%
<b>360</b>	10	355	3%
<b>364</b>	8	375	2%
<b>368</b>	55	1033	5%
<b>Total</b>	669	8922	7%

## COUGAR

Most cougars in the district are harvested by deer and elk hunters who opportunistically cross paths with a cat during general deer/elk seasons and have a cougar tag in their pocket. However, more hunters are finding that cougar hunting is a fun and challenging experience. The early season is open September 1 – December 31. The late season starts January 1 and continues until harvest guidelines are reached (seasons close April 1). Male cougars are territorial and use a broader range when deer and elk are dispersed in summer and early fall. Deer and elk typically migrate back to the winter range by mid-November. Cougars will follow, and the highest cat densities can be found during late fall and winter in lower elevations. One popular cougar hunting technique is to use calls. This is most successful when there is snow on the ground and tracks can be found. Rather than following the cougar hoping to “run it down”, hunters call, trying to get the cat to come to them. Several calls work. During deer and elk seasons, hunters might consider a fawn bleat call, which typically won’t spook deer or elk. Without snow, it can be difficult to know where to start. Rather than working large blocks of timber, consider timbered stringers. Cougars inhabit open terrain but prefer cover. Cats hunting open shrubsteppe will likely be hiding in timber stringers during the day. Cougars inhabit nearly every portion of the district, but some online hunting groups post where cats have been seen recently. Checking those sites may improve your success.

## WATERFOWL

Breeding population surveys resumed in 2022 for the first time since 2019. Numbers in Washington were down significantly, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will publish results in August. Ducks need water and the extreme drought throughout the west and prairie potholes had a negative impact on populations 2020 and 2021. Spring 2022 was late, but water was much more plentiful in most northern locations. If production was up, increased numbers won't be seen on surveys until 2023.

In District 8, fall/winter populations have been declining. Harvest peaked around 50,000 birds in 2012 and has declined to roughly 20,000 in recent years (Figure 5). It is somewhat surprising harvest held above 20,000 during the 2022-23 season. There appeared to be few ducks, especially mallards in District. Harvest estimates were either inflated or hunters took a lot more teal and ring-necked ducks. As row crops like corn are converted to hops, orchard, and vineyard, there is little reason for large numbers of ducks to stay in the district.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley, especially on Yakama Nation (YN) lands, which is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their [Feel Free to Hunt map](#) annually, use Google Earth to pre-scout, and don't be afraid to explore. YN's Satus Wildlife Area is the most popular and is open to hunting Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday, and holidays. The main Satus Wildlife Area is very popular due to relatively easy access. Hunting can be just as good on Mosebar ponds and north Satus.

Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SSWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). The Sunnyside Unit has several managed wetlands like the Rice Paddies, Johnson Wetland and for the first time in three seasons the Haystack Ponds will be available after repairs to pumps were completed. The Haystack Ponds provide ADA blinds. There are several agriculture fields with small grains that should provide for field hunting opportunities as well. has continued to manage challenges with dense vegetation and low water in recent years. Harvest and hunter days on Sunnyside have been low.

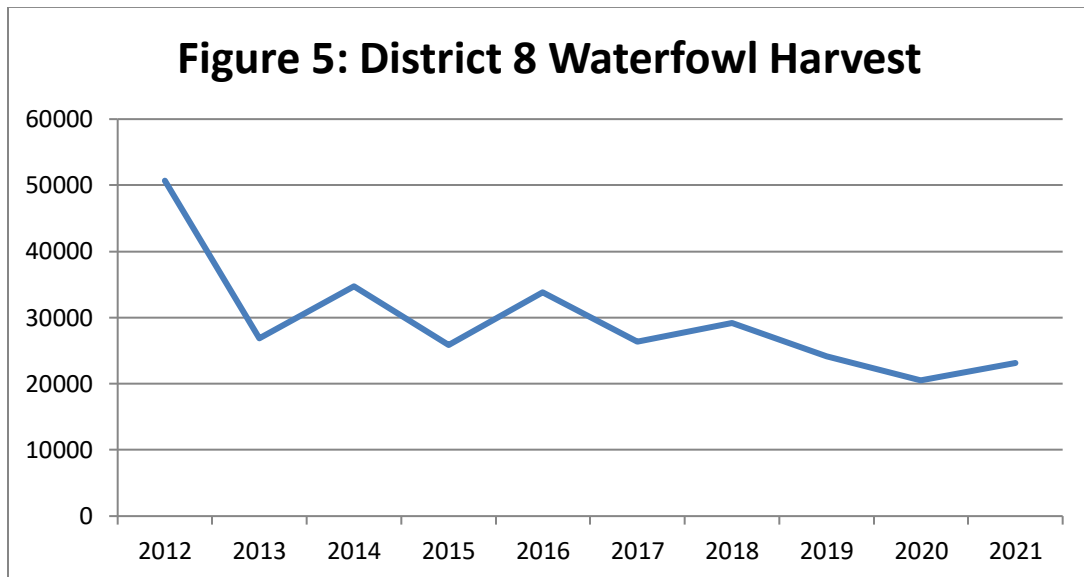
Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge has also had difficulty filling wetlands, especially in October. Water cannot be pumped from Toppenish to fill wetlands in the Robins Unit unless flows are greater than 30 cubic feet per second. The Pumphouse wetlands are dependent on Toppenish Creek side channels to fill at higher creek levels. Flows in those side channels have been a bit unpredictable in recent years. It appears that at a gauge height of 3 feet, the channels should fill. Hunters can check flow/levels at the [USGS website](#). Summer flows in Toppenish Creek are always low. Significant fall rain is needed, which usually doesn't come until November. A private hunt club due east of the refuge that attracted large numbers of ducks to the area was abandoned a few years ago. Few ducks were seen leaving the reserve and flying over the

Toppenish Refuge last year. Before making a trip to Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. The May mallard breeding population was down >40% in eastern Washington. There is no information on 2022 production. Banding takes place in August, after this report is written.

Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The USFWS surveyed northern areas this year, but population estimates aren't published until August. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best 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.

[An excellent introduction on waterfowl hunting in Washington can be found on the WDFW Let's go waterfowl hunting webpage.](#)



## DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. Harvest had been declining until recruitment increased the 2020-2021 (Figure 6). The good recruitment was obvious at banding stations. Minimal information is available for 2022 as banding had just started when this report was written.

The best hunting success in the lower Yakima Valley is on private land. The better public hunting can be found on the Yakama Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. Information on hunting on Yakama Nation land is available on their [website](#).

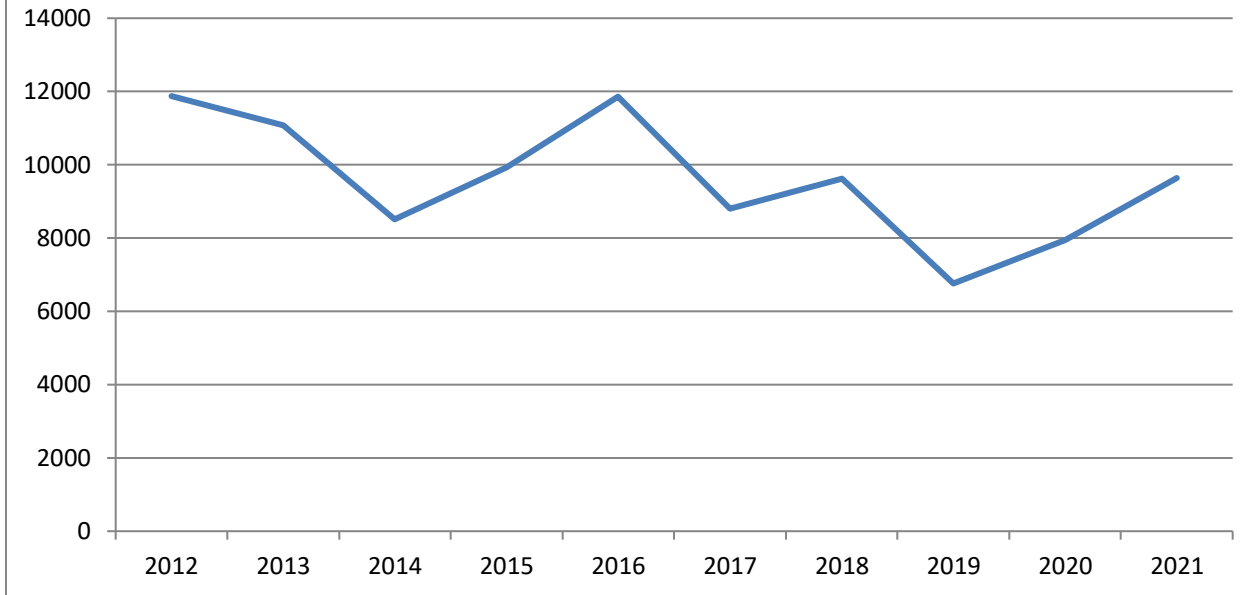
The Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area has public dove hunting, but registration boxes suggest relatively poor harvest. Hunters typically average <1 bird per day. Many of the ag fields on the wildlife area will provide opportunity for dove hunting.

Dove numbers in the area often depend on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep most 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. It is best to scout just a few days before the season to find birds.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunities, as the season extends year-round, without bag limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically, but there was a die-off in 2018-2019, probably due to Avian Paramyxovirus-1. The virus was widespread nationwide in Eurasian collared doves, and populations have not rebounded. No information is collected on collared dove harvest nor are there surveys. The difficulty for hunters is that most collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to behave more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find opportunities 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.



**Figure 6: District 8 Dove Harvest**

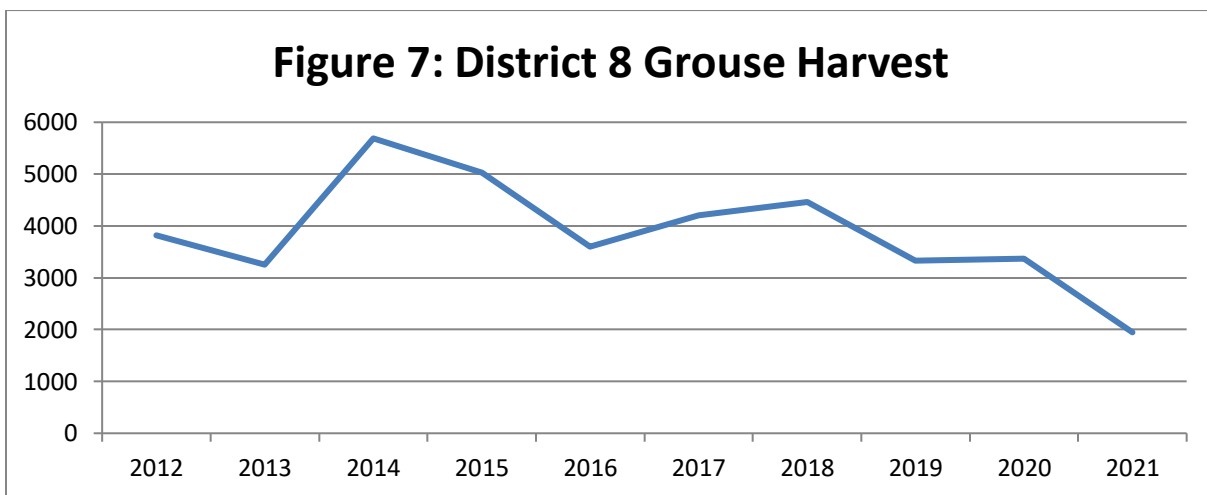


## FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 hit an all-time low in 2021 (Figure 7). Some of the decline was likely due to fires/closures, but those that did report hunting only took 0.15 birds per day (6-7 days per grouse harvested). There is no information on the 2022 hatch, but it would be hard for novices to find some grouse in the district.

Most of the harvest in District 8 is on blue grouse. Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike morning or evening.

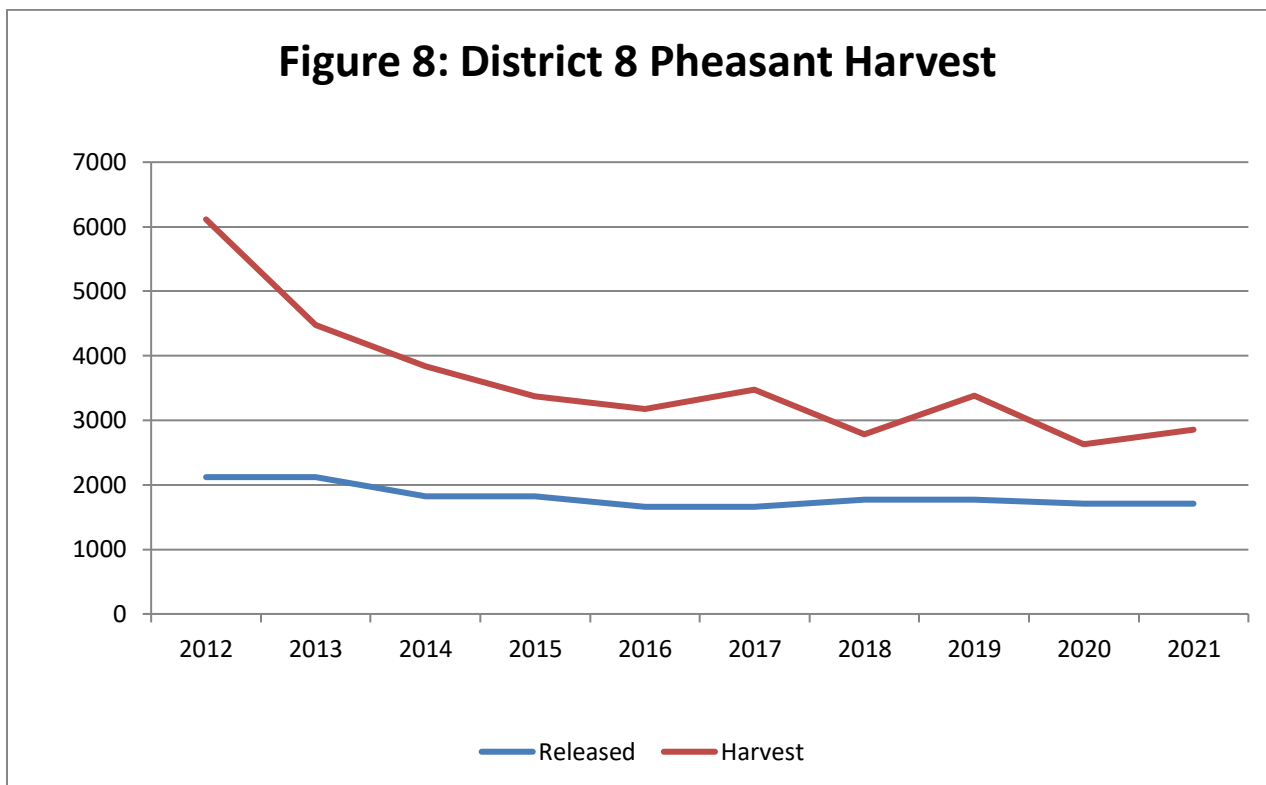


## PHEASANT

Pheasant harvest in District 8 has declined about 50% over the last ten years and recently leveled out at very low levels (Figure 8). The only place to find huntable numbers of wild birds is on the Yakama Nation Reservation (YN). Pheasant numbers have been declining for decades on YN due to conversion from fallow land to crops. There has been no recent change in this trend. Even if grain prices declined, farmers would switch to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle. A compounding negative factor is the conversion to hops and orchard.

Wild pheasant in District 8 typically have better hatches with high moisture. This year moisture was much better than the previous two years. Irrigation water can make up for dry conditions where it seeps into weed patches, but those areas are becoming rare. Reality is that wild pheasant contribute little to the total harvest in the district and harvest is overestimated. In Kittitas County (no wild birds), 490 pheasant were released and harvest was estimated at 1100.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8 and there is no information on 2022 hatch. Released pen-raised pheasants are the main source of opportunity for most district pheasant hunters. About 1200 birds will be released at Sunnyside and 500 at Whiskey Dick.

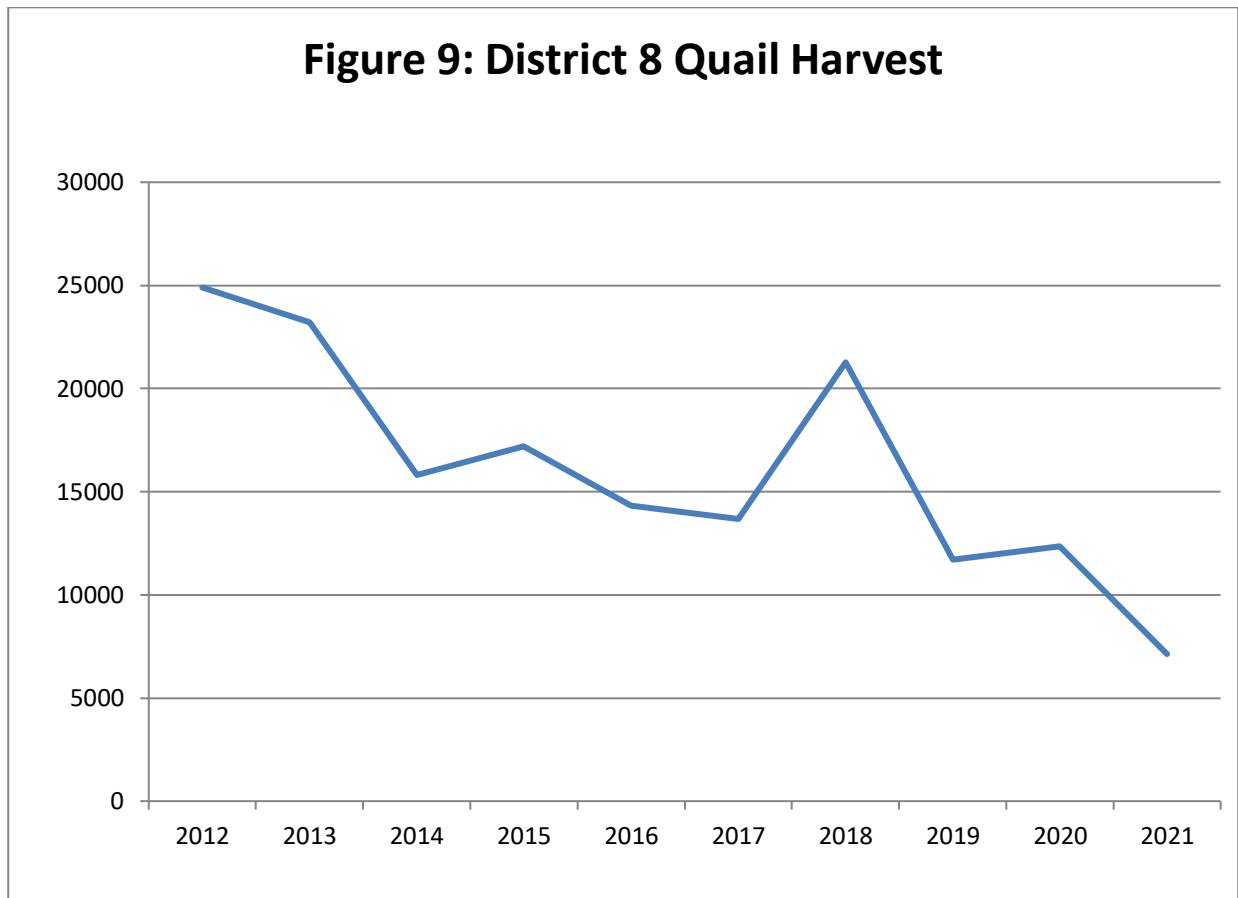


## QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail are typically in the lower Yakima Valley.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest the last 10 years (Figure 9) and 2022 was the lowest harvest ever recorded. . A variety of factors from deep snow (2016-17), drought (2020-2021), and fires have reduced quail populations. Quail in riparian draws surrounded by sagebrush are getting hard to find. Most of the quail habitat on the Wenas Wildlife Area has burned in recent years. The best chance of finding good coveys will be near rivers and irrigated land.

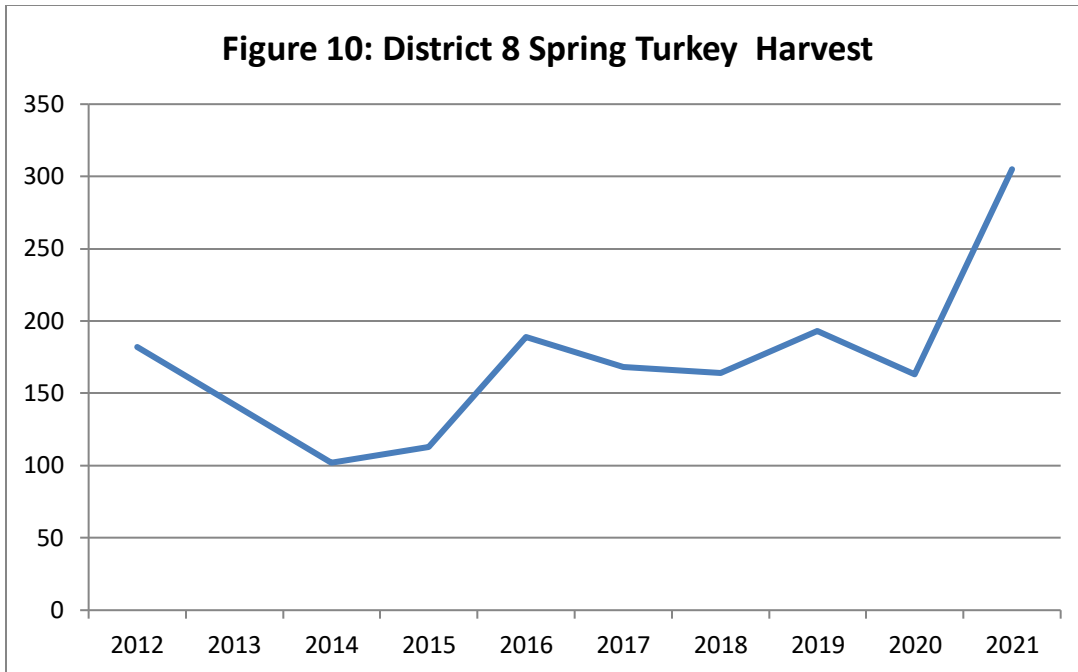
The best opportunity is along the lower Yakima River on the Yakama Nation ([YNWildlife.org](http://YNWildlife.org)). WDFW has parcels along the river on the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area (SSWA), but registration boxes show poor harvest. Roughly 87% of upland bird hunters are unsuccessful at harvesting a quail on SSWA and harvest averages 0.16 per day.



## TURKEY



Turkey harvest has been increasing since 2014 (Figure 10). The majority of the District 8 harvest comes from GMU 335 (Table 3). The best hunting early in the spring is on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will move into higher elevations on the Teanaway Community Forest. The remainder of GMUs produce <30 bird harvest.



**Table 3: District 8 Spring Turkey Harvest by GMU**

GMU	GMU Name	2019	2020	2021	AVG
328	NANEUM	25	17	27	23
329	QUILOMENE	16	11	25	17
334	ELLENSBURG	17	14	20	17
335	TEANAWAY	70	59	112	80
336	TANEUM	20	26	42	29
340	MANASTASH	16	9	32	19
342	UMTANUM	16	18	17	17
346	LITTLE NACHES	0	0	2	1
352	NILE	3	0	3	2
356	BUMPING	0	3		1
360	BETHEL	0	2	3	2
364	RIMROCK	0	0	5	2
368	COWICHE	10	4	10	8
372	Rattlesnake Hills	2	2	7	4
	<b>Total</b>	195	165	305	222



## PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been decreasing since 2018 (Figure 11) with drier conditions. The slight increase in 2021 likely wasn't real. As hunter numbers/harvest declines, confidence in estimates gets lower. The 95% CI for 2021 chukar harvest was 345-2125 birds in Yakima County and 415-2215 in Kittitas.

History has shown that abundant snow and a wet, cold spring produces a lot of vegetation and birds. There are few three-year-old game birds, so the population is composed primarily of hatch-year birds. Precipitation came late in 2022 and the spring was cold. Hatches are expected to be better than 2022, but late. The best hunting in recent years has been on the Quilomene and Colockum Wildlife Areas.

The Yakima Training Center (YTC) is very popular with long-time chukar hunters. Much of YTC has burned in the last decade and 2021 was an extreme drought year for the area. Hatches are expected to be better in 2022, but it will likely take multiple wet springs to significantly increase populations.

**Figure 11: District 8 Chukar/Hun Harvest**

