

# BIG GAME 2016 PREVIEW

BY JIM YUSKAVITCH | REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE OREGON HUNTERS ASSOCIATION



Last year's big game preview noted that a mild winter went easy on deer and elk, resulting in increased overwinter survival of fawns and calves, producing better hunting opportunities for the fall. The winter of 2015-16 was a bit harder, not enough to knock down big game numbers in any significant way, but it did have impacts on overwinter survival that will translate into some limited hunting opportunities for younger bucks in some areas. The usual challenges for big game managers remain, including cougar predation in some parts of Northeastern Oregon and diminished logging levels in the Cascade Mountains that are limiting elk numbers. And the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is continuing its Mule Deer Initiative to bring those animals' numbers back up to speed. Nevertheless, the big game outlook is still pretty good for the most part, and even in areas where opportunities might be on the thin side, there are things that hunters can do to increase their odds of success. Here's a rundown on what ODFW wildlife biologists around the state have to say about the current state of big game populations and prospects for the fall hunting seasons.

## DEER

"Deer-wise it's been fairly productive over the past couple of years," says Dave Nuzum, Assistant District Wildlife Biologist in Tillamook, of the North Coast region. "Our buck ratios are around benchmark," he continues. He also notes that they are not seeing much in the way of diseases lately, especially hair loss syndrome that was a major concern to wildlife managers a few years ago. Based on what he's seen so far, Nuzum predicts pretty good black-tailed deer hunting on the North Coast this year.

"We've been meeting our buck-doe ratio benchmarks," says Springfield-based District Wildlife Biologist Brian Wolfer, of his black-tailed deer populations, with 25 to 30 bucks per 100 does. Fawn ratios are also very good, with 30 per 100 does in the north Indigo Wildlife Management Unit and 56 to 100 in the McKenzie Unit.

"In general, we have pretty decent buck carryovers from last year so there will be some big, mature bucks around for those hunters who can find them," says Wolfer.

Unlike other parts of the state, last winter in Southwestern Oregon wasn't especially harsh according to District Wildlife Biologist Tod Lum in Roseburg. "Deer are doing about as well as last year and are in good shape. Two years ago there was an outbreak of Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease, a major wildlife disease that killed at least 300 deer in Lum's district, and probably more, but seems to have since subsided."

According to Tom Collom, District Wildlife Biologist in Klamath Falls, deer numbers there are at about status quo. "However," he says, "we had a little lower overwinter fawn survival that will impact the number of juvenile bucks. We're still below our population Management Objective but because we can control hunter numbers we can maintain good buck ratios."

In the Ochoco Mountains region, District Wildlife Biologist Greg Jackle reports that, due to a harder winter, the fawn survival rate was down from the previous two years. "I will expect fewer yearling bucks on the landscape," he says. "Overall, deer are stable to slightly down this year."

"Deer are doing okay," reports Autumn Larkins, Assistant District Wildlife Biologist in Hines. "We had better than expected fawn survival except for the Silvies Unit, probably because of heavy winter weather." Buck ratios are down a little from past years, but still at MO. The bottom line for the High Desert country is that deer numbers are stable and, except for the Silvies Unit, hunting should be good.

Leonard Erickson, District Wildlife Biologist in Pendleton, reports that buck ratios are around MO for his districts, although due to a harder winter parts of Northeastern Oregon also experienced reduced fawn survival resulting in fewer juvenile bucks. There are still good hunting opportunities, but with fewer juvenile bucks available, hunters may have to work a little harder to find the bigger, older, more wary bucks.

## ELK

Elk numbers remain pretty good throughout Northeast Oregon, with populations at or above MO in many, but not all units. "Overall elk numbers in the Catherine Creek and Starkey units are good and above MO," says Erickson. However, in some areas, cougar predation is the likely culprit in keeping calf to cow ratios below target levels.

Elk are doing great in the Silvies, Malheur and High Desert units of Southeastern Oregon, in part due to the increase in the number of alfalfa pivots going in that attract elk like kids to ice cream, and Autumn Larkins and other ODFW staff in Hines spend a lot of their time managing damage issues. That will translate into good elk hunting opportunities come fall.

"Elk are doing pretty good this year," says Greg Jackle of the Ochoco region. Even though they are a bit below their benchmarks for bull and calf ratios there are still a lot of elk in the Ochocos — about 4,150 in the Ochoco Unit — just a few hundred below MO — making this part of the state a top destination for elk hunters.

Even though the Klamath Falls area isn't known for elk, there are decent numbers that are currently about at MO. "We've seen some good-size bulls in the Keno Unit this year," comments Collom.

Brian Wolfer reports that the elk situation in the western Cascades is largely the same as it has been for a number of years now. With less logging on national forest lands, elk are tending to move onto private industrial timberlands where regular cutting produces more desirable habitat and forage conditions. Despite lower elk numbers and shifts in land use, bull ratios remain good. Wolfer emphasizes that advance scouting and research is paramount for elk hunting success in the Cascades now. Some suggestions include checking Google maps and aerials to scope out burns that are at least a couple of years old that will have the vegetation mix attractive to elk. The Forest Service also maintains good fire maps that will give you leads on where to concentrate your efforts.

The situation is similar in Southwest Oregon. "The biggest gripe among folks who have been hunting elk for years is that they have seen a big decline in elk numbers," says Lum. But there are elk available in southeast, including some nice bulls. Like Wolfer, Lum also emphasizes that hunters who do their homework will be the ones who have a successful hunt.

With more logging going on in the Coast Range, Dave Nuzum says that habitat isn't as big an issue in his region, although "elk populations are a little below MO," he explains. But he thinks those numbers will come back up in a few years, noting that bull ratios remain good.

## BIGHORN SHEEP

While Oregon's overall bighorn sheep population is stable, the situation can vary between herds. Some herds in the Hells Canyon area are still recovering from past disease outbreaks, while others may be

having predation issues. Autumn Larkins has just under 1,000 bighorns in her district that are doing okay. They are still keeping a close eye on the Riverside herd, which is not faring as well as ODFW would like, possibly due to cougar predation, so it may be awhile yet before any tags are offered for that herd. ODFW recently relocated the last of the Branson herd to the Klamath River canyon where they are doing well. The Branson herd was a band of bighorns released near the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument a few years ago in an attempt to reintroduce the animals to that region but failed due to contact with domestic sheep that increased the threat of disease transmission. Despite the ups and downs of bighorn sheep management, overall, lucky hunters who draw "once in a lifetime" bighorn tags generally have a very high success rate.

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN GOATS

Rocky Mountain goats are an Oregon wildlife success story and are doing well with a total population in excess of 400. While the Elkhorns in Northeast Oregon have Oregon's largest goat population, herds have been established in other parts of the state including the Strawberry Mountains and, more recently, the Mount Jefferson area in the Cascades. There are even a couple roaming the Newberry Crater National Volcanic National Monument south of Bend. Overall, Rocky Mountain goats are doing very well.

## PRONGHORN

Pronghorns are one of Oregon's more reliable, steady big game species with populations that tend to be mostly stable, and ODFW manages them conservatively to provide good quality hunts with high success rates.

Tom Collom reports a slight increase in pronghorns in the Klamath region over the past four or five years along with high buck ratios. Larkins says that pronghorns are doing similarly well in the High Desert country, with the Juniper Unit providing the best hunting opportunities. There are even some "woodland" pronghorns in the Ochocos that Greg Jackle confirms are stable with decent buck ratios.

## BEAR AND COUGAR

Bear and cougar numbers are generally strong throughout the state, with cougar numbers lowest on the North Coast and highest in Northeast and Southwest Oregon. You'll find bears in just about any forested parts of Oregon, with the highest populations on the south coast. With the exception of spring bear hunting, hunters mostly take bear and cougars incidentally while hunting other game species.