



2017 HUNTING OUTLOOK

DEER POPULATIONS DOWN IN BAKER, UNION COUNTIES, 'FINE' IN GRANT COUNTY

Winter weather conditions always play a significant role in how big game numbers, and therefore hunting opportunities, shake out for the following hunting season that includes both how many animals will be available to harvest and their age makeup. For this year, it was winter with a capital "W," especially in northeast Oregon where heavy snows covered even low elevation winter range along with temperatures that dropped to minus 23, hammering deer populations in particular. While more-difficult-than-typical winter weather conditions also prevailed in other parts of the state, fortunately, deer and other big game species came through fairly well. Here is what some Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists had to say about the state of Oregon's big game populations and prospects for the 2017-18 hunting seasons.

Story by Jim Yuskavitch
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DEER

The big news was the heavy-hit mule deer took in northeast Oregon. In addition to sub-zero weather, the mule deer just couldn't find places without deep snow, no matter how low in elevation they migrated. The result was mortality levels that reached 32 percent for Baker County herds, a far cry from the more typical 8 percent winter mortality in the Blue Mountains. Fawn survival also took a big hit. Typical fawn ratios in the region are in the mid-30s per 100 does. This winter it dropped to 11 per 100 and as low as eight per 100 in some areas. In response to the hard winter, ODFW reduced the number of deer hunts in Baker and Union counties by as much as 50 percent, and a couple of antlerless deer hunts have been canceled.

The good news is that deer fared considerably better in the rest of the state. On the western end of the Blue Mountains in the John Day area, ODFW district wildlife biologist Ryan Torland described the local deer herds as "chugging along just fine." The fawn ratio is 30:100, which is a little less than ideal but manageable. It will mean fewer juvenile bucks available in the

fall. "But," says Torland, "buck ratios are pretty decent and at management objective."

Down in the High Desert country around Lakeview, district wildlife biologist Craig Foster reports, "Deer numbers are OK. However, the winter did knock down fawn survival to around 18 to 100 does, which is low." Since about 50 to 65 percent of the deer harvest in his district is made up of juveniles, hunter success rate will probably be lower this year. He does note that there are still lots of mature bucks on the district.

In central Oregon, heavy snows in the High Cascades did not especially affect deer herds, as the animals were able to retreat to winter range with low snowpack. However, here also, the fawns took a hit, with a 56 percent overwinter survival rate compared with the more typical 75-80 percent. "Buck ratios are at MO so the buck component is about where we want it to be," says Bend-based district wildlife biologist Corey Heath. "But hunters will see fewer spikes and forked-horns."

On the west side of the Cascades, district wildlife biologist Brian Wolfer, who works out of the ODFW Springfield office, reports that deer in his district made it through the winter just fine. "We had a lot of snow but it didn't last long in the lower elevations, so the deer had somewhere to get away from deep snow," he says. Buck ratios in the west central Cascades are

holding at management objective. He's expecting a typical success rate for black-tailed deer hunters this year, which is usually around 15-16 percent.

Down in southwest Oregon, black-tailed deer are doing fine with good buck ratios on the Applegate, Rogue and Evans Creek wildlife management units according to Central Point-based district wildlife biologist Mark Vargas. Because the black-tailed deer population in that region is migratory they need to be hunted a little differently. "Early in the season, hunters should be hunting above 4,000 feet, then drop down to below 3,500 feet near the end of the season," Vargas advises. He also notes that some of the best black-tailed deer hunting in the state is in the Chetco and Sixes units, where the hunter success rate can reach 35 percent.

Despite a rough winter in the Coast Range, Dave Nuzum, assistant district wildlife biologist based in Tillamook did not see an unusual level of deer mortality. "We had pretty good overwinter survival because they went into the winter in very good condition, our buck ratios are at benchmark, and our population may even be creeping up a little," says Nuzum.

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