

2019 big game preview

By Jim Yuskavitch
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The mild winter with warmer temperatures and little snow abruptly ended in late February when several feet or more of the fluffy stuff fell within a few days in many parts of the state, especially in the higher elevations that made it more difficult for deer, elk and other wildlife to find food, shelter and move around.

While that had many hunters concerned, the big dumping had surprising little negative impact on deer, elk and other big game populations, although it did cause problems in some regions.

Overall, hunters can look to reasonably good — or at least the same as last year — big game hunting opportunities this year in most parts of the state. Here's a roundup of what Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife wildlife biologists around Oregon recently had to say about upcoming big game hunting prospects.

Deer

While hair loss has been an ongoing issue with North Coast black-tailed deer populations, Tillamook-based ODFW assistant district wildlife biologist Dave Nuzum has not seen as many instances this year, and in fact, deer populations are pretty robust in his district, which includes the Saddle Mountain, Trask and Wilson units. While the Coast Range got quite a bit of snow in late February, it melted off fairly quickly, and Nuzum isn't very concerned about excessive winter mortality.

In Southwest Oregon, district wildlife biologist Tod Lum in Roseburg reports more deer hair loss than normal. But it was confined to the Rogue Valley area, and overall his black-tailed deer populations are stable, overwinter survival was good and he predicts a typical hunting season for this year.

Even though the Cascades got hit pretty hard by the late winter blizzard, Chris Yee, Springfield-based district wildlife biologist, has seen enough adult deer and fawns that survived the winter to suspect that any winter mortality is probably confined to specific areas where the deer couldn't find enough food or shelter. But once you cross into mule deer range the picture changes significantly.

"Deer are not looking good and fawn winter survival was not great," said district wildlife biologist Greg Jackle in Prineville, whose district covers much of the Ochoco Mountains.

Fawn ratios are at 17 to 100 does in the Grizzly unit, 27:100 in the Ochoco unit and 31:100 in the Maury unit, a far cry from the 50s-plus that the biologists shoot for. That low fawn survival will also translate into fewer juvenile bucks for hunters next season.

"It's tough," said Jackle. "That heavy snowfall and delayed green-up really hammered them."

On the positive side, he has good numbers of adult bucks, which should still provide decent hunting opportunities this year.

"Mule deer numbers are dropping across the West and we are feeling that trend here in Wallowa County," said assistant district wildlife biologist Shane Talley in Enterprise.

However, despite that overall decline in populations, right now mule deer numbers in his district are stable, with good buck ratios that should provide hunters with decent opportunities for the upcoming season.

Mule deer are also struggling in the High Desert region.

"We're not heading in the direction that we want to be heading," said Hines-based assistant district wildlife biologist Autumn Larkins.

Although the desert region was spared the big blizzards that hit other parts of Oregon, they still experienced some high winter mortality. Larkins thinks that was because the deer went into last winter in poor condition due to the extensive drought southeastern Oregon has been experiencing for a number of years now. On a positive note, Larkins reports they have decent buck ratios.

Elk

In Oregon, elk are generally doing well, and in some places a little too well.

"Elk are faring pretty well," said Shane Talley in Enterprise. "We have some herds where we are managing more intensively to curb their growth."

Talley expects Northeast Oregon elk hunters to have a good season this year. Despite some low calf ratios in the Malheur River unit, Larkins reports that there are still a lot of elk in that unit along with the Silvies unit and High Desert region.

The story is the same in the Ochoco region of the Blue Mountains. Elk numbers are good and stable, reports Greg Jackle.

"The bull elk population is stable to increasing in the southern Blue Mountains," he said.

In the Grizzly unit, the bull ratio is 11:100. "Hunters will see about the same opportunities for elk as they have over the past few years," Jackle said.

However, the situation changes as you move into the Cascade Mountains.

"Elk in the Cascades continue to decline," says Tod Lum, the Roseburg-based biologist.

That's largely because of the decline in logging on federal lands in the Cascade Mountains resulting in less plant diversity for forage. Because of that decline, there have been no cow hunts allowed throughout the Cascades Mountains for the past several years to try and boost numbers.

Said Lum, "For anyone who has been elk hunting in the Cascades for the past several years, it will be about the same — poor."

Farther north in the Cascades, Chris Yee notes that elk will move from federal lands onto private industrial timberlands where there is more logging in search of better habitat. Despite the heavy February snowfall, it didn't result in much mortality as many elk moved down into valley areas to get out of the deep snow.

On the other hand, elk are faring well on the North Coast.

"It's looking pretty good," says Tillamook-based Dave Nuzum. "We have a little more cutting in the Coast Range and a good number of clearcuts are at the stage where they are more productive and attracting more critters."

As with deer, he expects to see good hunting opportunities for the upcoming season.

Bighorn Sheep

"Bighorn sheep are doing pretty well," said Talley. "We've been fighting pneumonia for the past 20 to 25 years, but for now they are doing pretty well."

Well enough that ODFW has added two new bighorn sheep hunts in Northeast Oregon — one in the Wenaha unit and another in the Snake River unit.

"We've got some good rams out there that hunters should be excited about," said Talley.

In Southeast Oregon, Larkins reports that some bighorn herds are doing well while others not so well. East Beatys Butte/Alvord Peak bighorns are having ongoing problems.

"Something is going on there, and we can't seem to put our finger on it," said Larkins.

ODFW captured a number of bighorns last winter and tested them for disease, but they came up clean. However, there is ongoing concern that disease could spread to southeast Oregon herds by infected sheep across the border in Idaho and Nevada.

On the other hand, the Steens Mountain herd is doing very well. Larkins credits to some extent the removal of cougars as part of

the Mule Deer Initiative that also benefited the bighorns.

Rocky Mountain Goat

Rocky mountain goats have been faring very well across the Blue Mountains and into the central Oregon Cascades where they were reintroduced in 2010.

"Goats are doing well and are starting to fill up some of our underutilized habitat," said Talley.

Any hunter who draws a goat tag has a very good expectation of a successful hunt.

Pronghorn

Pronghorn numbers are generally stable.

"That's a species we usually are not too concerned about because we manage them so carefully," said Autumn Larkins. However, with the past seven or eight years of drought, Larkins is concerned that it might start to eventually take a toll. She notes that for now ODFW is not concerned enough to adjust tag numbers. Jackle reports that the pronghorn herds in the southern Blue Mountains region are generally stable. He notes that hunting pronghorns in his district is a little different than the typical desert pronghorn hunting experience as the animals there utilize forested areas.

Bear and Cougar

Both black bear and cougar numbers are healthy across the state, with the highest populations of bears along the coast, especially toward the southern parts, while northeast and southwest Oregon have the largest cougar populations.

In general, many ODFW biologists believe that the cougar population is at carrying capacity for much of the state. However, there has been an increase in cat numbers in recent years along the mid-coast that may be starting to expand northwards.

Dave Nuzum in Tillamook notes that he is seeing increasing hunter harvest of cougars along with more road kills and damage reports.

"It used to be a big deal when a hunter brought in a cougar in this district," he says. "Now, not so much."

Black bear populations are stable and solid in the forested habitat they prefer. Larkins has noticed an increase in bear harvest in the northern part of her district that might indicate an increasing population in the southern Ochocos.

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