

2020 BIG GAME PREVIEW

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While we've had a series of hard winters, last winter was mild because of reduced cold-weather mortality on big game populations.

But surprisingly, those mild conditions didn't necessarily help all big game species in all regions of the state due to a number of factors including low populations going into winter and disease. On top of that, the mild winter could signal drought later in the year that would result in less green-up and poor habitat conditions.

Nevertheless, across the state, big game numbers generally continue the pattern they have been in for the past several years with strong elk numbers throughout Oregon except in the Cascades, black-tailed deer doing well and mule deer still struggling.

Interestingly, most bighorn sheep herds have not been too troubled by disease lately. However, disease outbreaks had negative impacts on some mule deer populations. Here is the rundown on the status of big game based on the observations of a variety of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife wildlife biologists from around the state.

Deer

On the north coast, Tillamook-based assistant district wildlife biologist Dave Nuzum reports "good numbers of black-tailed deer, good buck ratios and good over-winter survival." That is generally the situation throughout Western Oregon.

In the central western Cascade Mountains, black-tailed deer are also mostly faring well with good buck-to-doe ratios, according to district wildlife biologist Chris Yee in Springfield. Although there were some outbreaks of adenovirus hemorrhagic disease (AHD) in local deer herds, Yee is more concerned that dry weather conditions in spring and summer may reduce forage sources.

ODFW conducted a black-tailed deer radio collar study in the western Cascades from 2012 to 2017 that yielded some useful information for hunters. "We found that most of our deer didn't move too far and had small home ranges," says Yee. "So if you are out scouting and see a nice buck in a particular area, it will probably still be there when the hunting season starts."

Roseburg-based district wildlife biologist Tod Lum reports that black-tailed deer numbers in southwest Oregon are about the same as last year, and hunting should be equally good for this season with the most successful hunters working old burns, brushy areas and open country.

But on the east side of the mountains,



Contributed photo/ODFW
Tests conducted by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife veterinarians confirmed that Epizootic hemorrhagic disease is responsible for the die-off of an estimated 2,000 white-tailed deer in Eastern Oregon.

the story with mule deer is essentially the same as it has been for a number of years now — low and, sometimes declining, populations.

While assistant district wildlife biologist Ryan Platt in John Day reports stable buck ratios, they have not had very good fawn carryover despite the mild winter. In 2015, an outbreak of adenovirus disease hit local deer herds, and Platt thinks there still may be lingering affects. "Since 2015 we've had low fawn ratios going into winter and low fawn ratios coming out of winter," he says. "We're not replacing the deer we are losing."

On the bright side, regrowth from the 2015 Canyon Creek fire in the Murderers Creek Wildlife Management Unit is producing more deer than other units in the John Day watershed.

The news is worse further northeast. "Our mule deer numbers are the lowest I have ever seen them right now," says Enterprise-based district wildlife biologist Pat Matthews. "We're not recruiting fawns like we used to so those numbers are not bouncing back." He's considering reducing the number of tags available for the 2021 seasons, but for now hunters after mule deer in northeast Oregon should expect low success.

However, their white-tailed deer numbers are pretty good, and populations are up in the Sled Springs, Minam and Imnaha units. While they are harder to find and harvest, white-tails are providing some alternative deer hunting opportunities.

Mule deer populations continue to be down in the High Desert Region as well, according to Rod Klus, district wildlife biologist out of the Hines ODFW office. Mule deer in south central Oregon were hit with an

outbreak of AHD recently that Klus thinks might have spread into High Desert herds undetected and may be part of the explanation for weak population numbers. But weather is more of a concern. Says Klus, "With the mild winter we had good carryover, but drought is affecting habitat conditions for mule deer."

Elk

Roosevelt elk throughout the Coast Range are generally doing very well and at management objectives overall. On the north coast, Nuzum reports that bull ratios are above management objectives, with the Saddle Mountain unit the best elk producer. Down on the southern end of the state, district wildlife biologist Lum says there are plenty of elk in the coast range units where regular logging activity on private timberlands is being conducted.

It's in the Cascades where elk are still struggling, largely due to a lack of logging on national forest lands, and they are tending to concentrate on private timberlands. Some are now moving down onto agricultural lands where they can cause problems.

"The only thing that will really help," says Chris Yee, "is if we can get some good projects going on national forestlands to improve habitat for big game. We have some in the works, but it takes time to get them implemented."

Yee also notes they have recently documented hoof rot disease in some elk in the Oakridge area, and asks if hunters spot any limping elk while out scouting this season, anywhere in Oregon, to let ODFW know.

"Elk are doing fine and are at or above MO," says Platt of herds in the Blue Mountains of the John Day region. ODFW biologists spotted a variety of age classes while doing winter elk surveys, so, Platt continues, "we know that there are older, big bulls out there."

In northeast Oregon, Pat Matthews reports "elk are doing very well and bull ratios have been pretty strong." He expects elk hunters to have a typically good season in his district. He also notes there has been a reduction in cow tags in the Chesnimnus and Imnaha units where ODFW is finally getting elk numbers under control that had substantially exceeded MOs, and were

causing agricultural damage issues.

And while not Oregon's premier elk hunting destination, Klus reports that High Desert elk are doing fine and are at or above MO in most units.

Bighorn sheep

The news for Oregon's desert and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep population is pretty good. High Desert herds, according to Klus, are doing fine, stable and not having any particular issues for now with disease or predation. Platt reports a similar situation with McClellan and Aldrich mountains herds. Last winter, ODFW conducted a capture and disease test of 23 sheep in those two herds and found no presence of pneumonia in any of the animals.

"All our bighorn sheep are doing well, except for the Hurricane District hunt herd, which is seeing some problems with pneumonia," says Matthews in Enterprise. Currently there is one tag for that hunt, and ODFW is considering closing it down beginning in 2021 until herd numbers come back a little. Otherwise, test results for the other northeast Oregon bighorn herds have come back negative for the pneumonia bacteria.

Rocky Mountain goat

Rocky Mountain goat numbers are doing very well through their Oregon range. Matthews reports goats are increasing in numbers in his district as is the Strawberry Mountain herd — up to about 80 animals as of last year's survey. "If the population grows a little more we will probably offer an additional tag," says Platt.

As with bighorns, hunters who draw a goat tag should expect a quality hunt with a high success rate.

Pronghorn

"Pronghorn are still going strong," says Rod Klus of the High Desert population. "They haven't had any peaks or valleys in a good while, which is unusual as they can be flashy." Pronghorn hunters should expect a typical season for 2020.

Bear and cougar

Oregon continues to have healthy black bear and cougar populations, with the largest numbers of bears in the south coast mountains, and the biggest cougar populations in southwest and northeast Oregon — although biologists are seeing an increase in cougars into northwest Oregon over the last few years. While hunters will specifically target bears for spring hunts, and some hunt cougars by calling, most bear and cougar are harvested opportunistically.

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