

Idaho Fish & Game News

February 2011



Volume 23, Number 2

Hunting Elk in Idaho has Changed but Still a Good Bet

An individual elk hunter in Idaho stands about the same chance of tagging an animal this fall as in any other hunting season in the past two decades.

Elk hunting in Idaho has changed over the last few years, but the autumn pursuit remains popular and productive. Participation in elk hunts has dropped off overall for several

years as statewide elk numbers have dipped, permits have been trimmed, and word has traveled through the hunting community that finding elk is tougher since wolves have increased.

If this fall's hunts follow last year's pattern, elk hunters will take fewer animals statewide than they did 20 years ago because hunter numbers will be down. But the percentage of hunters who actually tag an elk should be close to that of the mid-1980s.

Elk numbers in Idaho hit a peak of about 125,000 in the mid-1990s. The number of hunters increased in response to that boom until more than 100,000 bought tags in 1996, the peak year for tag sales. The numbers have declined from the peak in the mid-1990s to around 103,000 elk estimated in March 2010.

The number of elk hunters has dropped as well. In 1997, 96,700 hunters bought tags and took 18,500 elk; in 2009, 87,022 hunters bought elk tags and reported taking 15,813 elk. That works out to an 18 percent success rate. Hunter success rates have hovered around this percentage for at least 20 years.

This figure includes all forms of elk hunting from archery, where the percentage averaged across all hunts is in single digits, to muzzleloader hunts that produce figures just into double digits through general rifle hunts to some controlled hunts in which 80 percent or higher success is not unusual.

While the hunter success rate has not changed substantially over two decades, elk hunting in Idaho certainly has.

As elk populations have dwindled away in the fabled Lolo, Selway and Middle Fork wilderness hunting areas, hunters have been turning their attention to areas surrounding this core of Idaho's most remote mountain ranges. Compared to

distribution patterns of 30 years ago, more elk are spending at least some parts of the year in front range mountain areas where they are not forced to go far to find groceries on agricultural lands.

In parts of Idaho like this, hunters may find physical access easier than on traditional two-week horseback and pack-train elk hunts into the publicly owned wilderness, but legal access to private lands may stand in their way.

Populations in roughly one third of Idaho's 29 elk management zones are running below department objectives for bull elk, developed in 1997. Elk in other places are doing just fine, and numbers are above objectives in several zones.

Idaho Fish and Game provides information hunters can use to find a reasonable chance of seeing elk. Some hunters may want to avoid the nine elk hunting zones that have bull populations lower than objectives and choose one of the 20 others that meet or exceed objectives.

The hunting section of the department Web site <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov> contains harvest information from the previous season and archives from other recent years. More information is available in a handy format in the Idaho Hunt Planner. Hunting seasons and other pertinent information is contained in the big game hunting rules book, available online or on paper in mid-April.



A successful elk hunter heads for home.

IDFG photo

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2009 Elk Hunt Success Rate by Zone Deer and Elk Meet Objectives in Most Areas

Panhandle	A tag 15.1%	B tag 15.4%
Palouse	A tag 28.3%	B tag 13.8%
Dworshak	A tag 24.6%	B tag 16.3%
Lolo	A tag 14.2%	B tag 13.5%
Hells Canyon	Controlled hunts only	
Elk City	A tag 19.6%	B tag 17.7 %
Selway	A tag 10.9%	B tag 15.1%
McCall	A tag 18.8%	B tag 12.5%
Middle Fork	A tag 22.7%	B tag 20.1%
Salmon	A tag 23.3%	B tag 18.9%
Brownlee	A tag 17%	No B tag
Weiser River	A tag 21.2%	B tag 20.7%
Sawtooth	A tag 11.1%	B tag 9.9%
Boise River	A tag 10.4%	B tag 12%
Smoky Mountains	A tag 12.4%	No B tag
Bennett Hills	A tag 24%	No B tag
Owyhee-South Hills	Controlled hunts only	
Snake River	A tag 18.7%	No B tag
Big Desert	A tag 12.5%	No B tag
Pioneer	A tag 20.4%	No B tag
Lemhi	A tag 24%	No B tag
Beaverhead	A tag 24.2%	No B tag
Island Park	A tag 14.1%	No B tag
Palisades	A tag 12.2%	B tag 10.5%
Teton	A tag 19.2%	B tag 7.7%
Tex Creek	A tag 15.2%	B tag 22%
Diamond Creek	A tag 20.4%	No B tag
Bannock	A tag 9.7%	No B tag
Bear River	A tag 20%	B tag 19.2%

Controlled hunt success rates in Idaho averaged 35% in 2009.

Deer and elk numbers are meeting management objectives in most parts of the state, but hunter numbers on average have declined.

White-tailed deer are meeting management objectives for buck harvest throughout the state.

Mule deer exceed management objectives for buck to doe ratio. Statewide fawn survival last winter was about 70 percent, with high doe survival.

It's too early to tell how the mulies will fare this winter, but Fish and Game hopes to get a better idea from the 193 fawns biologists recently captured and radio-collared.

Deer tag sales – whitetail and mule deer – have declined by 12,715 tags since 2008, when Fish and Game sold 145,869 tags. It dropped to 133,154 tags in 2010 – a decrease of about 9 percent.

Female elk numbers meet or exceed objectives in 23 of 29 elk management zones; they are below objectives in six zones. Bull elk meet or exceed objectives in 20 zones and are below objectives in these nine zones – the Lolo, Dworshak, Selway, Sawtooth, Middle Fork, Pioneer, Smoky Mountains, Island Park and Salmon elk zones.

Fish and Game is conducting aerial surveys in the Panhandle, Dworshak, Boise River, Middle Fork, Lemhi and Teton elk zones this winter to update elk herd information in those zones.

Elk tag sales were down by 7,800 tags. Tag sales went from 92,565 in 2008 to 84,765 in 2010 – a decline of about 8 percent.

When controlled hunts are added in, overall elk hunter success rates are about 20 percent.

Fish and Game managers will bring proposed 2011 deer and elk seasons to the Idaho Fish and Game Commission in late March.



Deer tag sales

2008 – 145,869

2009 – 137,907

2010 – 133,154

Sales declined 12,715 tags since 2008

Elk tag sales

2008 – 92,565

2009 – 87,021

2010 – 84,765

Sales declined 7,800 tags since 2008

Idaho Fish and Game News

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Statewide Deer and Elk Status Overview, January 2011

White-tailed Deer

- All whitetail management units are meeting objectives for buck harvest and percentage of 5 point bucks in harvest.
- Management units 4 and 6 are slightly below objectives for hunter number and hunter days, but whitetails are not the major focus for hunters in these units.
- Still recovering from losses during 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 winters in northern part of state.
- No formal population surveys for whitetails.

Mule Deer

- All mule deer management units exceed 15 bucks per 100 does.
- Mid-December to mid-January, regional wildlife staff captured and radio-collared 225 mule deer, including 193 fawns.
- Currently monitoring 189 fawns and 616 adult does spread among 39 units in 12 management units as part of annual mule deer survival monitoring effort.
- December/January fawn capture weights are in the middle of the range observed over the past 10 years. Winter condition concerns and depredation issues exist in Magic Valley, Southeast and Upper Snake regions.
- Aerial surveys under way to estimate populations in Central Mountains and Middle Fork management units.
- Fawn survival about 70 percent in southern Idaho with high doe survival last winter. Expect good recruitment, and increase in two points available for harvest.
- Detailed preliminary harvest results available for first look about February 16.

Elk

- Twelve elk zones are meeting female elk population objectives, 11 exceed objective, six are below.
- Seven zones are meeting total bull elk objectives, 13 exceed objective, nine are below.
- Aerial surveys in February in Panhandle, Dworshak, Boise River, Middle Fork, Teton, and Lemhi zones.
- First look at detailed harvest results February 16.

Southwest Region

- Consider final reduction of three-year phase-in of quotas on Sawtooth A and B tags.
- Evaluate pronghorn archery controlled hunt harvest results.

Magic Valley Region

- Address chronic elk depredations in units 52A, 56 and 45, with Landowner Permission Hunts, Xtra tag hunts, increased tag levels.
- Consider expanding elk hunts in units 46, 47 and 57 where elk numbers have increased.
- Move rotating deer muzzleloader hunt from units 52 and 56/57 to units 54 and 47.

Salmon Region

- Eliminate cows from Middle Fork A tag hunt.
- Adjust Lemhi Zone tags, depending on aerial survey results.
- Consider changing Unit 30A rifle bull hunt (10 tags) to muzzleloader either-sex hunt.
- Evaluate and consider options for controversial unlimited controlled deer hunt in 36A.

Hunter Success Rates

Year	Elk hunters	Harvest	Success
1997	96,700	18,500	19%
1998	98,046	18,860	19%
1999	96,027	17,484	18%
2000	n/a	20,200	
2001	n/a	19,500	
2002	90,900	18,400	20%
2003	92,500	18,400	20%
2004	99,500	20,800	21%
2005	98,900	21,500	22%
2006	99,400	20,400	20%
2007	86,000	19,060	22%
2008	84,067	16,017	19%
2009	87,022	15,813	18%

Year	Deer hunters	Harvest	Success
1997	154,500	38,600	25%
1998	149,736	39,042	26%
1999	154,000	40,868	27%
2000	n/a	45,200	
2001	136,200	53,000	39%
2002	134,500	44,650	33%
2003	143,300	43,500	30%
2004	147,200	46,160	31%
2005	150,400	54,100	36%
2006	152,900	51,700	34%
2007	148,900	40,560	27%
2008	131,926	43,605	33%
2009	125,195	42,091	34%

Preview of Issues and Season Proposals

Clearwater Region

- Create new 11X deer hunt, 100 tags to address depredations.
- 15X deer hunt reduce tags in response to effectiveness in reducing depredation complaints.
- Consider converting Unit 11 late rifle hunt (71 tags) to antlered elk archery hunt with 50 tags and extend early rifle hunt. Change Unit 18 either-sex archery hunt to antlered-only with a one-year waiting period to increase drawing odds for sought-after tags.

Idaho Fish and Game Policy

Idaho wildlife management policy is set by seven volunteer commissioners. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission's policy decisions are based on research and recommendations by the professional staff of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and with input from the governor's office, the state Legislature, hunters, anglers and the public.



Mule Deer Initiative Seeks to Improve Mule Deer Numbers

By Jim "JJ" Teare

The ultimate goal of the Mule Deer Initiative is to increase mule deer populations. To date, more than 18,000 acres of habitat improvement projects have been established, resulting in direct benefits for mule deer on a local herd level. But to affect mule deer on a population scale (like a big game hunting unit) is a daunting goal we have set for ourselves.

Achievable? Measurable? To be honest, we don't know. However, by setting the MDI bar this high and looking at new management strategies to improve mule deer habitats on a landscape scale and across mule deer seasonal ranges, I am confident we are heading in the right direction.

So where do we begin and how do we get there? The first steps will be to secure adequate project funding and develop multiple conservation partnerships. To complete large scale habitat improvement projects on private or public lands is expensive. Today there are more opportunities for projects than there is funding. The Idaho Fish and Game will never be able to come up with enough funding alone to fill the need. The primary objective of the MDI will be to develop cooperative partnerships with any conservation agency and organization that has similar objectives to improve wildlife habitats across the southeast Idaho landscape.

The new MDI management strategies for the private land habitat improvement work are a good example of how forming partnerships and combining conservation program funding can make a difference. Over the past six years MDI has been working with private landowners,

establishing and primarily funding many acres of habitat projects, such as forage strips and shrub plantings in existing Conservation Reserve Program fields. A new MDI strategy will be to look at ways to develop, fund and expand the types of habitat projects we complete on private lands through taking advantage of the various Farm Bill programs.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies have the same budget and personnel constraints that agencies are



Mule deer numbers are closely linked to habitat health

IDFG photo

facing today. The new MDI direction will be to train and certify Fish and Game employees to become Farm Bill Technical Service Providers

Technical service providers will be able to work directly within Ag Department county offices, completing the necessary conservation planning workload to implement Farm Bill program and project conservation plans for private landowners. This will relieve the burden on Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Services Administration personnel and allow for additional wildlife conservation work to be completed through the Farm Bill programs.

Leveraging MDI project funds with Farm Bill program dollars will greatly stretch our limited MDI project budget and allow us to improve a lot more acres

of habitat for mule deer annually.

MDI will begin to look at private land wildlife resources on a more landscape level. Instead of looking at private lands for specific project types we will be developing Wildlife Conservation Plans for the entire ranch or farm. MDI staff will complete an assessment of the property to identify the various habitat types and the limiting habitat factors for mule deer and all wildlife. Working

cooperatively with the landowner potential habitat improvement projects will be designed to address the various limiting factors, and a time line for project implementation will be developed. At this point specific conservation programs (or a combination of state, federal and private programs) will be selected to best fit the resource and funding needs of the landowner and habitat project.

Landscape scale habitat management and large scale habitat improvement projects is the right direction for the MDI if we ever hope to see positive changes in mule deer populations. This is not a short term venture but a long term change in management actions and philosophies for the MDI team, conservation agencies, sportsmen and conservation groups, and landowners. With all groups working together and sharing technical and funding resources to address habitat issues we will all get there together.

The MDI Action Plan is available on the Fish and Game Web site: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/mdi/>.

Jim "JJ" Teare, is MDI coordinator for Idaho Fish and Game.

