

Hunter numbers, success below average for 2nd weekend

GREAT FALLS – Although the weather in north-central Montana improved from the opening weekend of the general rifle season, both the number of hunters and game animals passing through FWP's check station in Augusta remained well below average for the second weekend of the season.

Total number of hunters, both successful and unsuccessful, is the lowest count in nearly 30 years and 25% below recent average. As of Sunday evening Oct. 30, a total of 97 elk and deer had been checked through the check station, giving a harvest success rate of about 18% for hunters, which is better than last year at this time, but still 12% below recent average.

Elk harvest is better than last year at this point of the season, but still 33% below recent average. Little harvest is occurring on "Sun River" elk given the mild weather and lack of movement of these elk towards winter range. Both the HD 424 and 442 elk quotas remain open to antlerless elk harvest. When these quotas are met, antlerless elk harvest closes but the brow-tined bull season remains open through Thanksgiving weekend.

Mule and white-tailed deer harvest are 40% and 30% below normal, respectively. Deer harvest has been generally well distributed throughout the greater Augusta area. In addition to the recorded deer and elk harvest, two antelope, one **wolf**, one black bear, one mountain lion and a variety of game birds (upland and waterfowl) have been checked through the station.

The slow harvest to date is largely driven by fewer hunters and mild weather conditions making hunting more difficult and big game animals less likely to be up and moving. Deer harvest normally tends to increase in November as the rut begins, and many hunters over the weekend said that they were waiting for the rut before getting too serious about trying to fill their deer tags. Forecasted cooler and possibly wetter weather for the second week of the general rifle season may also be beneficial to improving harvest success for hunters.

The general deer and elk seasons runs through Nov. 27. The check station operated by FWP along Main Street in Augusta is the only biological check station in Region 4 and operates seven days a week from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. on weekdays and 10 p.m. on weekends. Hunters are reminded that they must stop at any check station they pass while hunting, whether or not they have harvested game. Biological check stations are intended primarily for biologists to gather trends and statistical information about animals and hunters.

Mountain lion hunters urged to review license changes

Following some changes to the mountain lion license structure by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission that are now in effect, lion hunters are urged to review the regulations before purchasing a license.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks offers three types of lion licenses for sale: a general mountain lion license, a limited special mountain lion license (application only by July 22), and an unlimited special mountain lion license. You may only purchase or apply for one license. The exception is that those who do not draw a limited special license may then purchase a general license.

In past years, hunters focusing their efforts on southeast Montana's Lion Management Unit 700 have purchased an over-the-counter general lion license and been able to hunt the whole region during the archery-only, fall and winter seasons. However, the general license is no longer valid in LMU 700 during the winter (Dec. 1, 2022-April 14, 2023).

"I think the biggest confusion for hunters this year is that they are used to buying a 'general lion license' that used to let them hunt LMU 700 for all seasons, but now the general license is only valid to hunt during the archery and fall (Oct. 22-Nov. 27) seasons without dogs in LMU 700," according to FWP Region 7 furbearer

specialist Emily Mitchell.

If you only want to hunt lions during archery or fall season, a general license covers both seasons in all LMUs except 150, which has different dates. An LMU will close when 20% of the quota is reached. But if you want to hunt the winter season with dogs, the general license is now only valid in hunting districts where any license can be used (LMU 170, LMU 299, LMU 305 and LMU 309).

Those wishing to also hunt during the winter in LMU 700 are now advised to buy an unlimited special mountain lion license (700-05), which must be purchased before Feb. 28, 2023. You can hunt only in the LMU or group of LMUs for which the unlimited license is valid for the duration of the winter season or until the quotas for specific LMUs are met, whichever comes first. That includes LMU 700. The unlimited special license will also let you hunt in any open LMU during the archery and fall season without dogs. The quota for archery and fall seasons is 20%, but all closed LMUs will reopen to finish filling the quota Dec. 1 for winter season.

The third type of lion license, the limited special license, is only valid during the winter season in the specific LMU applied for. This license must have been applied for by July 22, 2022. There are none offered for LMU 700, but there is one offered in at least one hunting district in every other region. During archery and fall seasons, however, the limited special license will let you hunt in any open LMU without dogs. The limited special license is not subject to or regulated by quotas within the LMUs for which it is valid, so it is valid for the entire season even if the quota is met.

The limited special license will allow you to chase mountain lions in any unit during the training season, but you can only harvest a mountain lion in the unit designated on your license. If you apply for the limited mountain lion license, you will not be eligible to purchase the unlimited special mountain lion license, but if you don't draw you can purchase a general license. Bonus points are available.

"Using Region 7 as the example, basically if a hunter wants to be sure to have a lion license every year and he or she is hunting in Region 7, he should buy an unlimited special license," Mitchell explained. "This does, however, prevent them from hunting anywhere else in the state during the winter season, but not during the archery or fall season."

"If someone wants to hunt a district not in Region 7 and doesn't want to have to adhere to the quota for that district, but also doesn't mind not being able to hunt the winter season if they don't draw that year, they should apply for a limited special license for the specific hunting district they want to hunt in," she said.

"However, if they do apply for a limited special license and do not successfully draw, they cannot purchase an unlimited special license that year, but they can purchase a general license that is only valid during the archery and fall without dogs seasons," Mitchell said.

Hunters should note that if they purchase the general license in error, they will not be allowed to exchange their general license or purchase the unlimited license.

Tiger muskies stocked at Lake Elmo

BILLINGS – After a winter and spring of construction and development, Lake Elmo is returning to the productive fishery it was before invasive Asian clams were discovered in 2019. Last week, 75 tiger muskies from the Miles City Fish Hatchery varying in length from 6 to 12 inches were stocked in Lake Elmo.

Fish plants began this spring as the lake was refilling. Rainbow trout, brown trout, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, channel catfish, fathead minnows, bluegill and yellow perch were stocked earlier this year. FWP hopes to stock largemouth bass in 2023.

Tiger muskies are a hybrid between northern pike and muskellunge and rarely occur in the wild. Most are produced in hatcheries. Because they are sterile, the population of tiger muskies in Lake Elmo will not increase. The addition of tiger muskies to Lake Elmo will diversify angling opportunities in this popular urban fishery and help control the population of nongame fish that enter the lake from the Yellowstone River via the ditch. Tiger muskies are aggressive piscivores (meaning they eat other fish) and are often used as biological controls to manage unwanted species, such as suckers and carp. Although ditch headgates are screened to prevent fish passage, small individuals can get through and enter Lake Elmo.

Originally, tiger muskies were planned to be stocked in Lake Elmo in 2025 or 2026. However, netting efforts in Lake Elmo earlier this fall showed higher than anticipated numbers of juvenile white suckers, longnose suckers and common carp. FWP moved forward on stocking tiger muskies after this sampling to reduce the population of these species.

Lake Elmo is within the eastern fishing district, which requires tiger muskies to be at least 40 inches in length for harvest. Full fishing regulations for the state can be found here:

<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/fish/regulations/2022-fishing-regulations-final-for-web.pdf>

For more information on Lake Elmo, please visit:

<https://myfwp.mt.gov/fishMT/waterbody/searchByID?waterBodyID=43840>

475 pheasants released at WMAs in southeast Montana

MILES CITY – Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff released about 475 pheasants at Isaac Homestead and Amelia Island Wildlife Management Areas near Hysham last week. That is in addition to 300 pheasants released at Isaac Homestead WMA prior to the youth pheasant and waterfowl hunt on Sept. 24 and 25.

Both hens and roosters were released, though only roosters may be shot by hunters.

The pheasant release program, dubbed "Roosters for Recruitment," is intended to recruit new hunters by promoting hunter success and providing additional hunting opportunities for hunters of all ages. The birds were raised at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge.

Pheasant releases have taken place at many other FWP-managed WMAs across the state.

The statewide pheasant hunting season is currently open and will close Jan. 1, 2023. Hunters may harvest three male pheasants daily.

Pheasant and other upland bird hunting regulations can be found online at:

<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/hunt/regulations/2022/2022-upgbrd-final-web.pdf>.

For more information on pheasant releases as part of the R3 efforts, please visit: <https://fwp.mt.gov/public-notices/news/2022/may/0502-pheasant-release-ea-decision-notice>

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