Outdoor Oklahoma

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2026 — ONLY $10 A YEAR



A PUBLICATION OF THE OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

PANORAMAS



Michael Hollie

Whether it's wildlife, fish, nongame species or habitat, your Wildlife Department exists to protect, conserve and manage Oklahoma's natural resources. But another part of ODWC's mission is to ensure this and future generations are able to enjoy those resources.

For ODWC's Fisheries Division, that includes doing what we can to create better angling for everyone. And it's well known among anglers and biologists that good aquatic habitat makes fishing better.

My colleague David Bogner, a fellow fisheries biologist with ODWC, says that when it comes to improving fishing, habitat is worth all the money we can spend.

Quality habitat is important for popular fish like crappie and black bass, which have the tendency to gather up around the habitat structure.

As Oklahoma's lakes get older, fish habitat suffers. When the lakes were impounded, the water covered trees and brush, and that underwater structure attracted fish. But when a lake becomes 50 or 60 years old, all of that natural habitat has decomposed. The fish populations disperse throughout the entire lake, which leads people to believe there is a problem with the fish population.

So, we address this issue by placing natural and artificial fish habitat (fish attractors) into lakes across the state, which gives anglers a better fishing experience.

Since 2024, my colleagues and I along with outside partners have been involved in a major project to improve fish habitat at Lake Eufaula. Donors are the City of Eufaula, Major League Fishing, the Fugitt Foundation, and local anglers. ODWC is able to use federal grant funds to create a 3-to-1 match on those donations.

After three years into this five-year effort, donations totaling $67,000 have been paired with ODWC and federal funding to realize $208,000 for fish habitat enhancement.

So far this year, 271 new artificial fish structures of various types have been placed in Lake Eufaula. Since the project's inception, more than 830 structures have been added to Eufaula.

In June, concrete structures called Reef Balls were used for the first time in Oklahoma. Other artificial structures that have been used at Eufaula are Shelbyville Cubes, Mossback, Pond King and Fishiding structures.

Historically, fish attractors have been brush piles, cedar trees, pallet structures, or artificial habitats like spider blocks made of rubber hoses and concrete. All of these things are particularly prone to deterioration or displacement, and usually within just three to five years. At that point, such habitat structures provide little, if any, benefit to fish or the anglers wanting to catch them. Plus, they require time and money to replace frequently. The costs add up for fisheries managers.

Using the artificial structures is not only cheaper but longer lasting. We're talking 12 to 15 years or more, and that makes for better fishing spots that don't go cold after a couple of years.

I've described the notable efforts being made at Eufaula, but ODWC continues to add fish attractors into scores of lakes across Oklahoma. And there's no secret where these "honey holes" can be found. Simply go online to ODWC's Fish Attractor Map at:
https://tinyurl.com/OKfishAttractors.



Michael Hollie, Fisheries Biologist

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ON THE COVER:
Big game hunting in Oklahoma proved to be a big deal again during the 2025-26 seasons for white-tailed and mule deer, elk, pronghorn and black bear. Archery hunters took more than 39,000 deer this past year, while the total harvest of 133,791 made this past year the second most successful deer season in the state's history. See the full Big Game Report starting on Page 14.

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OKLAHOMA

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

NOTES ON WILDLIFE • OUTDOOR TIPS • READERS' LETTERS • ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS
COMPILED BY DON P. BROWN

WILDLIFE STALWART GROENDYKE LEAVES LASTING LEGACY

The longest-serving wildlife commissioner in U.S. history, John D. Groendyke of Enid, died June 13, 2026, at age 81.

His legacy is woven into the history of wildlife conservation and the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Appointed to the state Commission in 1976, he served an unprecedented 44 years under six Oklahoma governors, providing steadfast leadership and spending many years as chairman of the Commission's Finance and Retirement Committee.

During his tenure, he played a key role in negotiating and acquiring more than 200,000 acres of Oklahoma's 1.5 million acres of public wildlife lands.



In recognition of his extraordinary service, the ODWC headquarters building in Oklahoma City proudly bears his name.

Groendyke was deeply involved with the Oklahoma Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the Grand National Quail Foundation, and he established the Wildlife Conservation and Natural Resource Development Chair at Oklahoma State University in 2011.

His many honors include induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, the Oklahoma State University Hall of Fame, the Oklahoma Conservation Hall of Fame, the NatureWorks Wildlife Stewardship Award, the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative's Fire Bird Award, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Lifetime Achievement Award, and the National Tank Truck Carriers Lifetime Achievement Award.

Groendyke was a man of many passions: an entrepreneur, avid collector, legendary outdoorsman, rancher, conservationist, and pillar of the Oklahoma business community. Above all, he was a devoted husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

He was born Aug. 17, 1944, in Enid to Harold and Pauline Groendyke. An only child, he grew up in Enid during the early years of his father's company, Groendyke Transport, which under his later guidance grew the company into one of the largest tank truck carriers in the nation.

He attended Wentworth Military Academy in his youth, then earned a bachelor's degree at Oklahoma State University in 1968 and a juris doctor from the University of Oklahoma in 1969.

He served in the U.S. Army from 1969-71.

In 1986, he took the helm of Groendyke Transport as CEO and Chairman. He was a meticulous leader who valued instinct and character.

Groendyke grew up with a deep respect and love for the land and wildlife. He was a world-class bird hunter, rancher and conservationist. But he was equally known for his collection of antique and classic cars, among the most admired in the country.

His philanthropic spirit was immense. From Leonardo's Children's Museum to the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation, the generosity of John and his wife, Virginia, reached into every corner of state and local life. He served on numerous local and state boards, and generously supported organizations, nonprofits, religious institutions, and businesses in Enid and throughout Oklahoma throughout his life.

Groendyke's vision, leadership, and unwavering commitment to Oklahoma's fish, wildlife, and outdoor heritage will continue to inspire generations to come.

OUTDOOR CALENDAR

FOR THE LATEST UPDATES, GO ONLINE TO LICENSE.
GOOUTDOORSOKLAHOMA.COM/EVENT/EVENTS.ASPX

NOTICE: Events were scheduled at press time; they are subject to change.

SEPTEMBER 2026

5 OKC Free Fishing Day, no city permit required.

5 OKC Youth Hooked on Fishing, 10 a.m., Route 66 Park, Yukon. Contact john.rayfield@okc.gov

5-6 **Oklahoma Free Hunting Days.**

6 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Predator Control, 8 a.m., OETA.

7 Labor Day (state offices closed).

8 **Okla. Wildlife Conservation Commission** meets, 9 a.m., Oklahoma City.

12 **Shotgun Training Education Program-Basics,** Okmulgee WMA. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx

13 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Bear Encounters, 8 a.m., OETA.

13 Reel Recovery fly-fishing retreat for men living with cancer, Beaver's Bend Lodge, Broken Bow. Apply at ReelRecovery.org

20 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Wildlife Artist Bryon Test, 8 a.m., OETA.

26 **Shotgun Training Education Program-Basics,** Canton WMA. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx

26 **Atoka WMA Field Day,** Rifle sight-in. Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx

27 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Big Game Season Outlook, 8 a.m., OETA.

- **National Wild Turkey Federation** event (date) in Woodward (26). Info: your.nwtf.org/members/events
- **Ducks Unlimited** events (date) in Claremore (3); Stillwater (4); Edmond (10); Atoka (24). Info: ducks.org/events
- **Quail Forever** events (date) in Edmond (5); Tulsa (13); Edmond (13); Yukon (26). Info: events.pheasantsforever.org/events
- **Delta Waterfowl** event (date) in Muskogee (12). Info: deltawaterfowl.org/events
- **Hunter Education Courses** (date) in Shawnee (10); Wagoner (12); Tahlequah (12); Antlers (12); Granite (19); Poteau (19), Enid (19); Sallisaw (21); Wayne (26); Cherokee (28). Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx

OCTOBER 2026

3 OKC Free Fishing Day, no city permit required.

3 OKC Youth Hooked on Fishing, 10 a.m., Route 66 Park, Yukon. Contact john.rayfield@okc.gov.

4 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Trevor & Dylan Hefner, Soft Plastics, 8 a.m., OETA.

5 **Okla. Wildlife Conservation Commission** meets, 9 a.m., Oklahoma City.

11 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Father's Day Special, 8 a.m., OETA.

18 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Hybrid Stripers, Seining, 8 a.m., OETA.

25 **"Outdoor Oklahoma"** TV, Gar Fishing, Tube Fishing, 8 a.m., OETA.

- **Ducks Unlimited** events (date) in Muskogee (8); Shawnee (22). Info: ducks.org/events
- **Delta Waterfowl** event (date) in Oklahoma City (3). Info: deltawaterfowl.org/events
- **Quail Forever** events (date) in Edmond (7); Edmond (23). Info: events.pheasantsforever.org/events
- **Hunter Education Courses (date)** in Blanchard (3); Sallisaw (10). Register: license.gooutdoorsoklahoma.com/Event/ViewEvent.aspx

** FOR HUNTING SEASON DATES, GO TO
www.wildlifedepartment.com/hunting/seasons **

SOME ANGLING, HUNTING RULES CHANGED OR ADDED

The 2026-27 Oklahoma Fishing and Hunting Regulations, in effect now, include several new or altered rules anglers and hunters should note. These brief summaries are provided for reference only; full regulations are found in Title 800 of Oklahoma's Administrative Code.

- **Crappie daily bag limit has changed for several public fishing areas. Daily limit at Lake Eufaula and Atoka Lake is 20 crappie per day. Boomer, Dahlgren, Holdenville, Purcell, Shell, Wewoka, and all "Close To Home Fishing" waters now have no daily bag limit for crappie .**
- **Echota and Stunkard access areas on the upper Illinois River are designated as Wildlife Department Fishing Areas.**
- **Cast net rules have been applied to certain rivers and streams.**
- **The 14" minimum for spotted bass in Blue River Public Fishing and Hunting Area has reverted to the statewide black bass limits for rivers and streams.**
- **The black bear harvest quota has been eliminated.**
- **A 48-hour waiting period is required for nonresident deer licenses.**
- **Elk season zone quotas and season dates have changed.**
- **Antlerless deer zone bag limits and season dates have changed.**
- **Possession of thermal and night vision devices are prohibited on wildlife management areas.**
- **Use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) on private and Department-owned lands are subject to certain restrictions.**
- **Edible plant parts and/or fungi may now be harvested on Department-owned lands under certain restrictions.**

To view the latest Oklahoma Hunting and Fishing Regulations, scan the code.



WESTYN FORD/THE ROCK

GAME BAG

A COLLECTION OF LETTERS TO THE WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

We'd like to hear from you! Send your letters to Outdoor Oklahoma Letters, P.O. Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK 73152-3465, or send e-mail to donald.brown@odwc.ok.gov

Dear Wildlife Department,

A robin was caught in a fishing line, hanging upside down from a tree branch at Lake El Reno. I attempted to contact friends and family for a long tree tool for cutting branches. Even tried to get in contact with El Reno Fire Department, but couldn't get through the dispatcher.



Dylan King

I made contact with game warden **Dylan King**. He told me he would come from Union City and try to rescue the robin. He was able to get the robin out of the line, and the robin flew away. I had gone back to my house to get some clippers, but he was already gone.

It was so nice that King arrived and was able to release the bird in such a short amount of time. He had another call and had to leave before I could thank him. I did call and thank him, but he deserves acknowledgement that he took the time to respond to a call most people … would think was irrelevant. The robin was the victim of a lazy human who failed to secure the fishing line. Today it was a robin; in the past it's been one of the geese.

As I was driving away, I happened to notice a large amount of fishing line that someone had discarded on the pavement. I was able to gather it all up to properly discard.

You should be very proud to have King as a game warden. He went above and beyond to appease this 76-year-old lady and save the life of a beautiful robin. Please accept my sincere thanks and appreciation for a job well done. I appreciate the service of all game wardens.

***Diana Tinsley**, via email*

Dear Director Wade Free,



Wade Free

I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated your attendance and speaking at the Kaw Lake 50th anniversary celebration.

I appreciate your personal involvement with Kaw Lake and all of the great things that ODWC does to help improve the hunting and fishing opportunities.

***Peat Robinson,** Kaw Lake Manager*

Dear ODWC Team,

I wanted to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude for the outstanding game warden youth camp that my son, Braxten, recently had the opportunity to attend.

It was clear that an incredible amount of planning, dedication and passion had gone into creating a meaningful experience for the campers. He returned home excited to share what he learned about wildlife conservation, outdoor safety, natural resources, and the important role game wardens play in protecting Oklahoma's wildlife and public lands.

The game wardens and staff served as excellent role models, demonstrating professionalism, leadership, and a genuine commitment to helping young people learn and grow. The experience not only increased my son's appreciation for Oklahoma's natural resources but also helped build his confidence.

Thank you for investing your time, energy, and resources into providing such a valuable opportunity for Oklahoma youth. Programs like this make a lasting impact, and our family is truly grateful for everyone who helped make the camp a success.

***Deanna James**, Lone Grove*

Dear Wildlife Department,



David Banta

I want to thank **David Banta**, technician at Hickory Creek WMA, and ODWC for their continued effort to make everyone's hunting and fishing experiences better. I want to thank Banta for coming out and helping me get my deer back to the truck and for taking my pictures. He does an exceptional job on Hickory Creek, and the number of deer and turkeys we are starting to see is paying off by his hard work. It really meant the world to me to share this hunting experience with him.

Terry Vernon

Dear Wildlife Commissioner James Barwick,



Joshua Luft

I had another fantastic year hunting Oklahoma Land Access Program land. I saw turkeys on almost every piece of OLAP I set boots on, or heard them gobbling from a position I thought I would be able to call them onto.

Please continue to push for the increase of this program. My 2-year-old son already has his lifetime license, and I will be buying my newborn a license very soon. The OLAP program makes me confident that they will have quality places to hunt when they come of age.

Also, is there a move to look at acquiring or leasing more lands for public use with river access? I'd love to fish Oklahoma's rivers, but it seems like most of the river access is way in the southeastern or eastern part of the state.

Hunter Meget



Mona Meiser

***EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Department's OLAP coordinator is* **Joshua Luft,** *and OLAP technician is* **Mona Meiser**. *To learn more, go to wildlifedepartment.com/lands-and-minerals/olap*

Dear Game Warden Jaylen Flynn,

I wanted to thank you and your staff for giving Bowdi such an amazing camp experience. This camp was truly something special. The skills the kids learned are priceless, and the time they spent outdoors taught them lessons they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. In today's world, it is so important for kids to learn about nature, gain confidence, and experience things outside of a screen.

Having ODWC staff as counselors made the experience even better. It gave the kids a chance to get to know these professionals on a personal level and helped them understand the important work they do. It really deepened their respect for our natural resources and for those who work hard to protect them.

Thank you to every one of you for the respect, structure, guidance and dedication you showed each camper. It is clear how much you care about these kids and the experience you provide. Our world needs more people like you and more opportunities like this.

And we can't forget the antler trophies! What a unique and awesome idea. Whoever thought of that deserves props.

Bowdi was honored to attend this camp, and … he has not stopped talking about it since he got home.

Dan and Jen Ohrmundt

***EDITOR'S NOTE:** Our latest magazine featured dozens of outstanding images in the annual Reader's Photography Showcase. However, we received reader feedback that we want to address. At least one photo may have been altered appreciably with Artificial Intelligence. Participants attest to the following when they enter: Submissions should have been taken in Oklahoma, must be original, and cannot be created or materially altered using Artificial Intelligence. We rely on the honesty of the entrants. The photographer told us the image in question was taken with a camera as it appears and isn't an AI-generated image.*

WELCOME TO THE DOCK!

Are the fish biting? You bet! Step onto The Dock and take a gander at some great catches made recently by Oklahoma anglers. Here's a few we thought you would enjoy! To see more or submit a photo of your catch, go to www.wildlifedepartment.com/fishing/the_dock or scan the code:



James Henry, blue catfish, July 4, 2026, Lake Eufaula.



Tom Friedemann, rainbow trout, June 24, 2026, Lower Mountain Fork River Trout Area.



Copper Garrett, striped bass, July 12, 2026, Lower Illinois River Public Fishing and Hunting Area.



Earl H., flathead catfish, June 18, 2026, Kiamichi River.



Carly, white crappie, June 14, 2026, Lake Thunderbird.



Fusty Crank, smallmouth buffalo, July 12, 2026, Lower Illinois River Public Fishing and Hunting Area.

WILD ABOUT COOKING

CRISPY OVEN-FRIED CATFISH NUGGETS

While deep-frying is one of the most popular ways to prepare catfish, the process itself can be messy. By using your oven or air fryer, you can produce similarly tasty results without the grease splatters and lingering aromas of traditional frying methods. This recipe makes 4 servings.



INGREDIENTS

1 pound cleaned catfish fillets, cut into 1.5-inch nuggets or strips

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

1 1/2 cups buttermilk

Nonstick canola (or other neutral flavor) cooking spray

1 cup yellow cornmeal

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon kosher salt (plus additional kosher or flaky sea salt to finish)

1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

1/2 teaspoon onion powder

Source: *Darby Doyle, Utah Department of Natural Resources*

DIRECTIONS

- In a large nonreactive bowl, dust catfish pieces with 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning and toss to coat pieces evenly. Pour buttermilk over catfish and stir to make sure all fish surfaces are covered. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 30 minutes (or up to 8 hours).
- Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Add a sheet of parchment paper to a rimmed baking sheet and lightly spray parchment with nonstick cooking spray.
- In a large bowl or plastic zip-top bag, combine cornmeal, flour, remaining 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning, salt, garlic powder and onion powder. Toss to combine ingredients to create breading mixture.
- Drain and discard most of the buttermilk from the catfish, leaving the pieces lightly coated in buttermilk. (Transferring catfish to a cooling rack over a rimmed baking sheet works great for this step.)
- A few pieces at a time, toss buttermilk-coated catfish in the breading mixture and make sure all sides are covered evenly in breading. Place catfish on parchment-lined baking sheet, making sure to leave space between catfish pieces. Repeat with remaining catfish nuggets. Lightly spray the tops of breaded nuggets with cooking spray. (This helps with browning and crisping.)
- Bake catfish nuggets until golden brown and cooked through, about 20-25 minutes. Catfish is done when it flakes with a fork but is still juicy. While hot, sprinkle with flaky sea salt or kosher salt to taste. Serve immediately, accompanied by tartar or remoulade sauce for dipping.

TIP: Catfish nuggets also turn out great using an air fryer! Following manufacturer's directions, air-fry coated catfish nuggets at 400 degrees for 10 minutes. Flip nuggets and continue air-frying until golden brown, about 10-12 minutes more.

GAME WARDEN'S JOURNAL

ACCOUNTS FROM THE FIELD BY THE PUBLIC SERVANTS WHO ENFORCE THE FISH AND WILDLIFE LAWS OF OKLAHOMA.

Game warden **Larry Green**, based in Osage County, received road hunting and other complaints about a Pawhuska resident in winter 2024. Based on investigation and information from the public, a search warrant was served on the suspect's residence.

Game wardens Green, **Spencer Grace, Jeremy Bersche, Jake Bersche,** and **Lt. Paul Welch** were assisted by Osage County Sheriff's Office in the search. Wardens found multiple illegal deer, hawks, eagles, turkeys, furbearers and more. Evidence included rotting and wasted venison and various collected trophies. Game wardens presented 140 violations to the Osage County District Attorney's Office.



After a plea agreement in November 2025, the person pleaded and will pay restitution to the state of $30,000; fines and court costs of $2,806.25; spend 20 weekends in jail; forfeit all long guns; and lose hunting and fishing license while on probation for about six years.

If the person had been charged with and found guilty of all 140 counts, fines plus restitution would have exceeded $152,000.

IT'S THE LAW:

Nonresidents 18 and older who will be hunting deer in Oklahoma must buy, at least two days in advance of hunting, the required additional deer license for the season in which they will be hunting. Nonresidents who buy the additional season license (i.e. deer archery) before that hunting season begins are not affected by this law. For example, a nonresident who will hunt Nov. 22 during deer gun season must buy the additional deer gun season license no later than Nov. 20, in addition to having the base nonresident annual hunting license.

This conclusion doesn't happen without accurate information from the public, diligent work from game wardens, and excellent cooperation in the courthouse.

Several Oklahoma game wardens joined nonprofit fishing organization Hog Fishing 918 on a fishing trip for children from Reed's Youth Center in Tulsa. Hog Fishing's Eric Bennett II said he believes in surrounding kids with positive role models so they know they're loved, supported and have people in their corner. He thanked the game wardens, Rogers County Sheriff's Office, and park rangers for spending time with the kids, helping them fish and giving them a positive interaction with law enforcement. Kids also got a Hog Fishing 918 shirt and a new fishing rod. (Image: Hog Fishing 918/Facebook)



(Reports from Oklahoma Game Wardens Facebook page.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Please help make a difference! When violators break the law, they steal fish and wildlife from you! Report wildlife violations anonymously to your local game warden.*

2025 CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

"THOSE MOMENTS ARE WHAT MAKES HUNTING SPECIAL"

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and Oklahoma Station Chapter Safari Club International sponsor a creative writing contest for middle and high school students. Boy and girl winners are chosen from two age divisions. Students' essay theme can be "Hunting: Sharing the Heritage" or "Archery: What I Like About Archery in the Schools and Bowhunting." Winners in the age 15-17 category receive a guided oryx hunt at Rockin S Ranch in Texas, and winners in the 11-14 age category receive a hunting trip with Rack Attack Outfitters of Fairview (or similar) and a scholarship to the Outdoor Texas Camp. In this issue, Outdoor Oklahoma honors junior male winner Lucas Padden, 11, 17, from Cleveland Public Schools.



By Lucas Padden

Hunting is more than just going out to shoot animals. It is a way of life for many that is passed down from father to son. When you hear the phrase "sharing the heritage" to me it means teaching others about their traditions, skills, and the values that come from hunting. To me, hunting is about spending time with my family and friends outdoors, learning about wildlife and making memories while hunting. It is not just about hunting; it is more about the whole experience for me.

My dad and uncle started teaching me about hunting when I was about age 6. When I would go out with them and sit in the blind and listen to them tell me about their hunting stories and memories. They taught me that hunting is not just getting a deer or shooting a pheasant or duck, but about understanding the land, the animals, and the importance of being a good steward of nature and learning to respect the animals that gave their life for me.

Before every hunt, they would make sure that I knew the rules of hunting, like making sure I knew how to manage a gun safely, how to properly identify animals, and only take what I need and know that I can safely make the shot. The memories of hunting with them both and learning about their hunting experience and making new memories with me are something that I will never forget.

One of my memories is walking down a dirt road with my dad, uncle, and the dogs in the early morning. It was cold and the sun was just coming out, and the puddles had a thin layer of ice. As we walked and watched the dogs, we could see our breath and see that the dogs started to sense the birds and track them. As we were walking, one of the birds flew at me, and everyone was laughing so hard that the bird got to live longer. We did not care that no one was able to shoot, it was the memory that was made that we still talk about today and the fun we had being with family and the dogs. Those moments are what makes hunting special and meaningful to my dad, uncle, and me.

Hunting has taught me responsibility that will last a lifetime. You must be patient, quiet, and respectful. You cannot just walk into the woods and expect to get something right away. Sometimes, you might need to sit for hours and not even see a deer, but it is OK. It is part of learning patience and appreciation of nature. It also teaches you to respect animals. Hunters know that every animal taken should be used properly, whether for food or other purposes. Nothing goes to waste. The time spent with family listening to past stories and making memories is just as important.

OKLAHOMASTATIONSCI.ORG

2026/2027 HUNTING SEASONS

DEER & ELK*	ARCHERY	OCT. 1 - JAN. 15
	YOUTH GUN	OCT. 16 - 18
	MUZZLELOADER	OCT. 24 - NOV. 1
	GUN	NOV. 21 - DEC. 6
	HOLIDAY ANTLERLESS	DEC. 18 - 31
BEAR	ARCHERY	OCT. 1-18
	MUZZLELOADER	OCT. 24 - NOV. 1
ANTELOPE	ARCHERY	OCT. 1-14
	GUN	DRAW ONLY
DUCKS	PANHANDLE	(REGULAR SEASON) OCT. 10 - JAN. 13 (YOUTH, VETERAN, ACTIVE MILITARY) OCT. 3 & JAN. 30
	ZONE 1 & 2	(REGULAR SEASON) NOV. 14 - DEC. 6 & DEC. 12 - JAN. 31 (YOUTH, VETERAN, ACTIVE MILITARY) NOV. 7 & FEB. 6
TURKEY	YOUTH SPRING	APRIL 10 - 11
	SPRING	APRIL 16 - MAY 16
	FALL ARCHERY	OCT. 1 - JAN. 15
	FALL GUN	OCT. 31 - NOV. 20

QUAIL	NOV. 14 - FEB. 15	**SQUIRREL**	MAY 15 - FEB. 28
PHEASANT	DEC. 1 - JAN. 31	**RABBIT**	OCT. 1 - MARCH 15
DOVE	SEPT. 1 - OCT. 31 & DEC. 1 - 29	**FURBEARER**	DEC. 1 - FEB. 28

All statewide elk seasons are quota hunts. Check quotas at wildlifedepartment.com before hunting. The Special Southwest Zone for elk has season dates that vary from the regular statewide season dates listed above. Consult the most current Oklahoma Fishing & Hunting Regulations Guidebook for the Special Southwest Zone dates.

DISCLAIMER: Equal Opportunity Statement - This program operates free from discrimination on the basis of political or religious opinion or affiliation, race, creed, color, gender, age, ancestry, marital status or disability. A person who feels he or she may have been discriminated against or would like further information should write: Director, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, P.O. Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK 73152, or Office of Civil Rights U.S. Department of the Interior 1849 C Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20240

Photo by Reagan Renfroe

SHOOTING RANGE WORK ADVANCES AT FULL BORE

BY MEGAN MOORE, SHOOTING RANGE COORDINATOR



Final details are discussed before the January ribbon cutting at the Copan WMA shooting range.

One goal of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) is enhancing public shooting opportunities across the state, a campaign which began in 2015. ODWC is working to ensure hunters, along with recreational and competitive shooters, have safe, accessible places to enhance their skills through new range construction and extensive renovations on wildlife management areas (WMAs).

2026 has been a busy year for shooting ranges in Oklahoma!

A new range was built at Copan WMA. It opened for public use in February and offers a 50-yard pistol range, a 100-yard rifle range, and an archery range with an elevated shooting platform. The new range includes Americans With Disabilities Act access and parking along with a vault restroom.

This year has also seen the renovation and expansion of projects at Lexington and Canton WMAs. The renovation of the Pushmataha WMA range is scheduled for this fall.

With funding assistance from the federal Wildlife Restoration Program and its Public Target Range subaccount, along with the generosity of donors, ODWC has completed 14 shooting range projects since 2017, with plans for additional sites to be newly built or upgraded through 2032 and beyond.

Each new and renovated facility will include metal-covered shooting stations with benches and tables, target stands, side berms, backstops, ADA access, fencing, gates, and parking areas. Depending on the site, additional features may include restrooms and ranges for long-distance rifle shooting beyond 100 yards, pistol, archery and/or shotgun shooting.

These facilities aim to play a vital role in supporting Oklahoma's hunters and sport shooters, reflecting ODWC's commitment to meeting the growing demand for public shooting access.

Whether a range site is being renovated, expanded, or newly built, most projects must go through environmental assessment, engineering, then construction. Each phase will vary in time required to complete the project before moving on to the next step, as each site has unique characteristics that require site-specific planning.



A metal roof shelters six shooting stations at the new Copan WMA shooting range.

If you haven't had a chance to visit one of ODWC's shooting ranges, now is the perfect time to find one near you and go sight-in your rifle or brush up on your bow skills before hunting season.

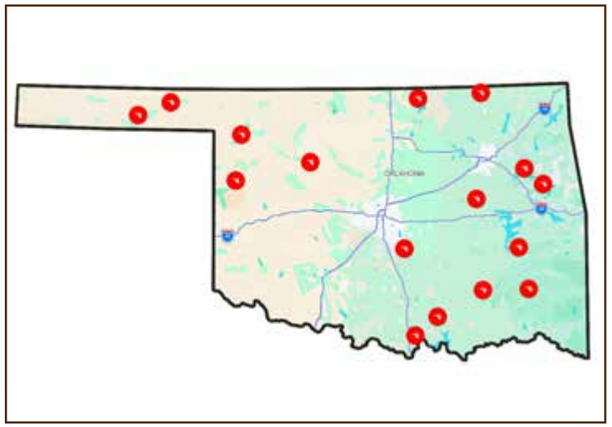
For ODWC shooting range locations and updates on range construction and renovation projects, go to wildlifedepartment.com/hunting/wma/shooting-ranges.

All ODWC shooting range users are required to hold a valid Oklahoma hunting license or combo hunting/fishing license, unless exempt.



The Copan WMA range features an elevated archery platform.

A MAP OF ODWC SHOOTING RANGE LOCATIONS.



COMPLETED PROJECTS

Location	Type	Completion Year
Cherokee WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2017
Lexington WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2017
Pushmataha WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2019
Beaver WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2019
Okmulgee WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2021
James Collins WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2021
Packsaddle WMA	New Construction	2023
Kaw WMA	New Construction	2023
Atoka WMA	New Construction	2024
Optima WMA	Renovation	2025
Copan WMA	New Construction	2026
Canton WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2026
Lexington WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2026
Pushmataha WMA	Renovation/Expansion	2026

GROWING SUCCESS

2025-'26 DEER HUNTING HARVEST SECOND-BEST IN STATE HISTORY

WITH ANTLERLESS

BY DALLAS BARBER, WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

Photo by: David McGowen, Provided

The 2025-26 big game hunting season in Oklahoma marked another highly successful year for hunters statewide. Favorable environmental and habitat conditions again played key roles, creating ideal circumstances for wildlife populations and hunting opportunities.

Supported by strong and healthy game populations, those conditions contributed to a combined deer harvest of 133,791 animals, further demonstrating the continued strength and sustainability of Oklahoma's big game resources.

This total ranks the 2025-26 season as the second most successful deer season in Oklahoma history based on total harvest numbers. The record remains the 2022–23 season, during which hunters harvested a combined total of 134,158 deer across all seasons.

Equally important was the continued commitment shown by Oklahoma hunters toward responsible wildlife management practices. Hunters across the state remained actively engaged in conservation-minded harvest efforts that support long-term herd health and sustainability.

One of the most notable achievements of the 2025-26 season was the percentage of antlerless deer harvested. Antlerless deer accounted for 45% of total harvest. This makes the sixth season in a row of achieving our antlerless harvest goal of 40% to 45% of the total harvest.

This antlerless milestone reflects a growing understanding among hunters of the importance of balancing herd dynamics, preventing overpopulation, and maintaining ecological stability. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's (ODWC) "Hunters in the Know … Take a Doe!" public awareness campaign likely contributed to that success by encouraging hunters to play an active role in effective deer management.

In summary, more hunters made sound deer management decisions during the past season. The continued emphasis on harvesting antlerless deer represents more than a numerical achievement — it demonstrates a proactive and strategic commitment to the long-term conservation of Oklahoma's deer herd.

By easing pressure on available habitat and food resources while helping maintain balanced buck-to-doe ratios, this management practice played a vital role in supporting strong and sustainable wildlife populations for future hunters and outdoor enthusiasts.

The firearm hunting seasons again accounted for the majority of the state's overall deer harvest during the 2025-26 season. The modern gun season, youth gun season, and holiday antlerless season combined produced a total harvest of 79,071 deer. These firearm seasons remain the most productive hunting periods in Oklahoma due to their accessibility, strong participation, and their support of statewide deer management objectives.

The state's nine-day muzzleloader season also delivered strong results, with hunters harvesting 15,636 deer. Popular among hunters who value traditional hunting methods and the added challenge of muzzleloading firearms, the season again proved to be a noteworthy contributor to Oklahoma's annual harvest totals.

Archery season, which offers the longest opportunity afield and often appeals to hunters seeking a more strategic and immersive experience, accounted for an additional 39,084 deer harvested statewide. The continued success of archery hunters reflects both the growing popularity of bowhunting in Oklahoma and the effectiveness of archery equipment in skilled hands.

Taken together, these harvest figures demonstrate the diversity of hunting opportunities available across Oklahoma while underscoring the important role each season and hunting method plays in maintaining a balanced and sustainable deer population.

Figure 1 shows antlerless and antlered harvest trends over time.

FIGURE 1: HARVEST TOTALS 2004-CURRENT

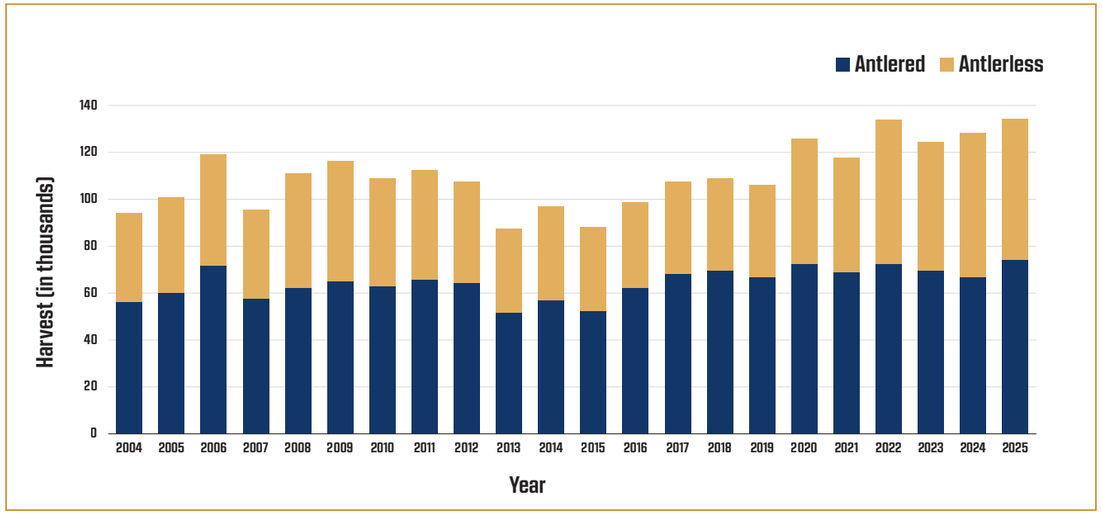
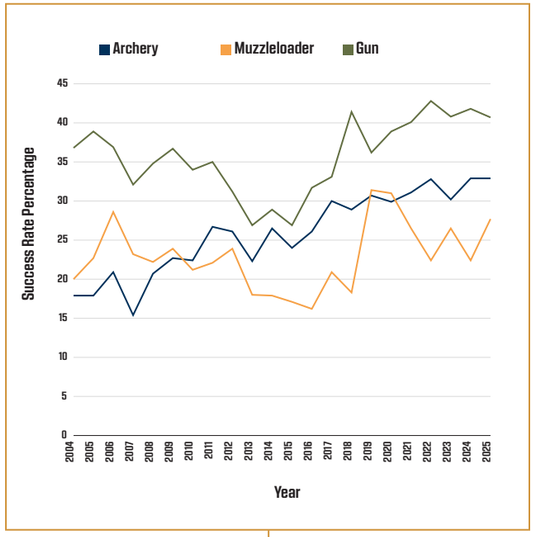


Figure 2 outlines hunter success rates by hunting method, while **Figure 3** illustrates the proportional contribution each method made to Oklahoma's total deer harvest.

FIGURE 2: HUNTER SUCCESS RATES 2004 - CURRENT



Oklahoma stands apart from many landlocked states because of its remarkable ecological diversity. From the dense pine forests and wetland habitats of the southeast to the expansive shortgrass prairies and sagebrush country of the northwest, the state encompasses a wide range of landscapes capable of supporting diverse wildlife populations.

FIGURE 3: HARVEST BY METHOD 2025-26

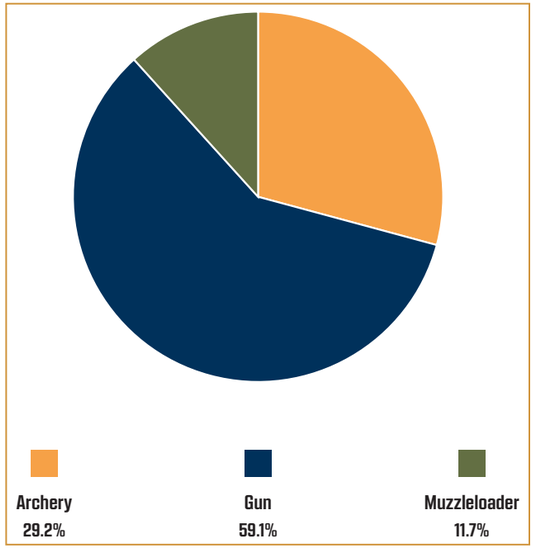



Photo By: David Strozdas/Provided

For deer hunters, this diversity creates an equally broad range of hunting experiences. Hunters are able to stand hunt or still hunt through heavily wooded river bottoms and hillsides or spot-and-stalk across open prairie landscapes.

These varying habitat conditions strongly influence deer distribution, population density, and overall hunting opportunities throughout Oklahoma. Local factors such as habitat quality, food availability, climate, and land-use practices all contribute to regional differences in deer populations, ultimately shaping harvest totals from county to county.

Also, access to public hunting areas influences hunting opportunity and harvest success. Focusing specifically on private-land harvest data offers a clearer picture of localized deer populations, hunting pressure, and harvest distribution within individual counties. To provide a more accurate representation of regional harvest trends, **Table 1** highlights deer harvest totals per county while excluding deer harvested on public lands such as wildlife management areas. The top three counties for total deer harvested during the 2025–26 season were:

- Osage County, which led the state with 5,062 deer harvested and continued its long-established reputation as one of Oklahoma's premier deer hunting regions.
- Pittsburg County, which recorded 3,975 deer harvested, reflecting the productivity and habitat quality found within southeastern Oklahoma
- McCurtain County, which totaled 3,172 deer harvested, indicative of both a healthy deer population and strong hunter participation throughout the county.


Photo By: Christopher Johnson/Provided

Table 1: Harvest by County, Sex and Method

	Archery		Gun		Muzzleloader		
County	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Total**
Adair	93	168	333	332	70	203	**1,199**
Alfalfa	122	165	377	359	31	64	**1,118**
Atoka	388	452	746	926	109	360	**2,981**
Beaver	17	40	84	229	3	15	**388**
Beckham	147	161	586	641	35	50	**1,620**
Blaine	74	114	255	464	21	44	**972**
Bryan	369	397	617	593	44	127	**2,147**
Caddo	195	302	559	994	56	111	**2,217**
Canadian	162	192	450	395	27	51	**1,277**
Carter	248	397	573	778	52	117	**2,165**
Cherokee	352	404	637	656	116	287	**2,452**
Choctaw	304	281	493	522	91	146	**1,837**
Cimarron	3	16	7	103	0	13	**142**
Cleveland	268	300	373	426	64	114	**1,545**
Coal	235	286	492	556	63	173	**1,805**
Comanche	116	184	244	281	30	55	**910**
Cotton	85	86	191	197	13	29	**601**
Craig	190	242	450	531	52	123	**1,588**
Creek	418	465	799	901	121	236	**2,940**
Custer	52	103	309	422	7	31	**924**
Delaware	381	368	516	530	77	213	**2,085**
Dewey	69	118	365	552	45	48	**1,197**
Ellis	45	88	278	444	20	31	**906**
Garfield	101	169	398	421	29	58	**1,176**
Garvin	283	330	575	748	69	118	**2,123**
Grady	279	337	789	757	75	118	**2,355**
Grant	139	207	681	558	53	86	**1,724**
Greer	88	72	203	279	19	35	**696**
Harmon	52	55	170	166	9	13	**465**
Harper	27	39	108	266	3	25	**468**
Haskell	192	255	451	496	100	256	**1,750**
Hughes	238	334	503	722	69	213	**2,079**
Jackson	124	127	292	299	27	38	**907**
Jefferson	198	204	382	296	19	50	**1,149**
Johnston	157	264	329	496	27	78	**1,351**
Kay	112	147	470	470	40	86	**1,325**
Kingfisher	101	129	393	407	28	45	**1,103**
Kiowa	86	116	248	280	16	36	**782**
Latimer	132	212	220	309	60	220	**1,153**
Le Flore	294	316	581	538	167	402	**2,298**
Lincoln	322	397	890	966	90	191	**2,856**
Logan	345	389	674	668	64	136	**2,276**
Love	179	235	265	319	24	22	**1,044**
Major	69	117	360	494	29	61	**1,130**
Marshall	59	109	109	187	7	22	**493**
Mayes	243	288	454	473	95	181	**1,734**
McClain	155	209	346	427	44	69	**1,250**
McCurtain	478	371	955	817	200	351	**3,172**
McIntosh	188	239	277	431	53	119	**1,307**
Murray	83	146	204	288	17	51	**789**
Muskogee	218	302	430	482	80	175	**1,687**
Noble	177	190	598	568	57	90	**1,680**
Nowata	173	202	495	563	65	93	**1,591**
Okfuskee	151	211	351	454	47	115	**1,329**
Oklahoma	365	509	392	403	37	66	**1,772**
Okmulgee	167	265	387	492	58	150	**1,519**
Osage	553	734	1461	1848	171	295	**5,062**
Ottawa	171	195	390	376	54	125	**1,311**
Pawnee	251	252	815	665	69	111	**2,163**
Payne	286	335	757	708	74	117	**2,277**
Pittsburg	610	754	858	1102	146	505	**3,975**
Pontotoc	290	422	605	727	74	140	**2,258**
Pottawatomie	340	446	746	773	78	207	**2,590**
Pushmataha	314	273	519	518	132	293	**2,049**
Roger Mills	49	123	453	667	36	66	**1,394**
Rogers	486	615	795	786	83	163	**2,928**
Seminole	291	301	566	661	96	174	**2,089**
Sequoyah	217	301	585	562	146	332	**2,143**
Stephens	277	399	445	586	39	89	**1,835**
Texas	4	14	25	110	1	14	**168**
Tillman	91	144	291	276	31	33	**866**
Tulsa	290	323	277	282	46	64	**1,282**
Wagoner	300	310	473	560	67	102	**1,812**
Washington	183	250	407	589	37	55	**1,521**
Washita	44	62	184	319	14	25	**648**
Woods	65	128	297	444	28	69	**1,031**
Woodward	66	131	334	511	15	42	**1,099**
County Total	**15,486**	**19,333**	**34,997**	**40,442**	**4,361**	**9,431**	**124,050**
Public WMA Total	**1,757**	**1,733**	**1,689**	**1,943**	**948**	**896**	**8,966**
OLAP Total	**379**	**396**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**775**
Grand Total	**17,622**	**21,462**	**36,686**	**42,385**	**5,309**	**10,327**	**133,791**

Table 2: WMA Harvest by Sex and Method (page 1 of 2)

	Archery		Gun		Muzzleloader		
WMA Name	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Total**
Arcadia Lake CEA	26	18	0	0	0	0	**44**
Altus-Lugert WMA	22	22	1	7	3	11	**66**
American Horse PFA	0	1	0	0	0	1	**2**
Arbuckle Springs WMA	11	24	6	9	0	0	**50**
Arkansas River USACE	10	5	2	1	1	1	**20**
Atoka PHA	0	6	12	17	7	18	**60**
Atoka WMA	35	32	14	12	2	2	**97**
Bamberger WMA	0	1	0	1	0	0	**2**
Barren Fork WMA	1	1	6	1	0	2	**11**
Beaver River (McFarland Unit)	2	3	0	5	1	1	**12**
Beaver River WMA	2	5	1	11	2	5	**26**
Beavers Bend SP (Golf Course)	1	0	1	0	1	1	**4**
Beavers Bend SP (River Bend)	0	0	2	0	0	0	**2**
Black Kettle WMA	22	24	121	122	41	20	**350**
Blue River PFHA	22	21	4	10	0	0	**57**
Broken Bow WMA	5	7	9	8	5	7	**41**
Burtschi PFA	4	4	1	1	2	0	**12**
Candy Creek WMA	15	8	1	2	2	0	**28**
Canton WMA	42	27	12	49	39	19	**188**
Canton WRP	0	0	5	3	0	0	**8**
Cherokee WMA (GMA Portion)	24	43	9	37	0	0	**113**
Cherokee WMA (PHA Portion)	20	27	6	41	21	29	**144**
Chickasaw National Rec Area	12	21	18	28	11	11	**101**
Cimarron Bluff WMA	1	1	0	0	0	0	**2**
Cimarron Hills WMA	2	0	0	0	0	0	**2**
Cookson WMA	19	20	3	9	4	3	**58**
Cooper WMA	3	1	0	37	0	3	**44**
Copan USACE Parks	4	6	3	2	1	0	**16**
Copan WMA	33	34	38	47	10	9	**171**
Cross Timbers WMA	75	71	16	8	0	0	**170**
Deep Fork NWR	15	28	2	2	18	10	**75**
Deep Fork WMA	11	8	34	29	11	13	**106**
Dewey County WMA	0	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
Drummond Flats WMA	3	13	0	0	0	0	**16**
Ellis County WMA	3	3	4	29	3	3	**45**
Eufaula WMA	30	49	41	55	18	34	**227**
Fobb Bottoma WMA	11	12	12	19	2	1	**57**
Fort Cobb State Park	1	0	2	0	3	1	**7**
Fort Cobb WMA	31	26	18	7	16	4	**102**
Fort Gibson USACE	13	16	10	18	6	15	**78**
Fort Gibson WRP	6	3	0	0	32	11	**52**
Fort Gibson WMA	104	73	15	86	57	38	**373**
Fort Sill	55	46	33	39	15	25	**213**
Fort Supply WMA	13	12	4	15	12	3	**59**
Four Canyon Preserve	0	0	2	0	0	0	**2**
Gary Sherrer WMA (Bolen Hollow)	0	0	0	0	2	4	**6**
Gist WMA	4	4	0	0	0	0	**8**
Grady County WMA	0	2	2	2	0	0	**6**
Grassy Slough WMA	1	1	0	0	0	0	**2**
Great Salt Plains SP	6	1	0	1	0	0	**8**
Camp Gruber Training CTR	6	11	10	66	58	53	**204**
Hackberry Flat WMA	3	3	0	0	5	10	**21**
Hall PFA	0	1	2	0	0	0	**3**
Herron Family WMA	6	4	19	10	1	4	**44**
Heyburn USACE	0	0	2	1	1	1	**5**
Heyburn WMA	8	2	20	12	7	4	**53**
Hickory Creek WMA	4	4	8	17	0	2	**35**
Honobia WMA	14	14	29	26	15	26	**124**
Hugo Lake USACE	12	7	12	10	3	4	**48**
Hugo WMA	47	24	41	31	13	22	**178**
Hulah WMA	30	29	44	96	42	20	**261**
James Collins WMA	46	62	9	20	0	0	**137**
Jap Beaver PFA	1	0	4	0	1	0	**6**
John Dahl WMA (Osage)	3	2	16	7	5	0	**33**
Kaw Lake USACE	22	14	27	14	9	8	**94**
Kaw WMA	51	51	113	89	46	39	**389**
Keystone USACE	30	9	21	11	4	5	**80**
Keystone WMA	62	44	84	43	23	16	**272**

Table 2: WMA Harvest by Sex and Method (page 2 of 2)

	Archery		Gun		Muzzleloader		
WMA Name	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Total**
Lake Thunderbird SP	50	48	0	0	0	0	**98**
Lexington WMA	40	29	30	6	30	23	**158**
Little River NWR	3	7	22	12	1	1	**46**
Love Valley WMA	1	8	37	31	5	4	**86**
Lower Illinois River WMA	2	1	1	2	0	0	**6**
McAlester Army Ammunition Plant	35	77	17	1	0	0	**130**
McClellan-Kerr WMA	26	12	27	18	19	5	**107**
McCurtain County WA	2	2	11	14	4	5	**38**
McGee Creek WMA	18	25	0	5	0	0	**48**
Mountain Park WMA	10	6	0	0	18	3	**37**
Neosho WMA	9	10	4	1	2	1	**27**
Okmulgee WMA (GMA Portion)	4	4	3	8	2	0	**21**
Okmulgee WMA (PHA Portion)	8	5	2	9	2	4	**30**
Oologah Lake USACE	26	31	34	28	9	5	**133**
Oologah WMA	53	35	71	76	20	28	**283**
Optima NWR	2	5	0	1	0	0	**8**
Optima WMA	3	3	1	17	0	0	**24**
Osage WMA-Rock Creek	1	2	0	18	1	4	**26**
Osage WMA-Western Wall	14	23	1	4	2	3	**47**
Ouachita WMA (McCurtain Unit)	13	17	36	35	14	35	**150**
Ouachita WMA (Le Flore Unit)	6	13	37	44	15	42	**157**
Ozark Plateau NWR	2	0	0	0	0	0	**2**
Ozark Plateau WMA	1	1	2	1	0	0	**5**
Packsaddle WMA	2	4	19	64	10	6	**105**
Pine Creek USACE	0	2	4	7	1	1	**15**
Pine Creek WMA	4	4	10	6	2	7	**33**
Pontotoc Ridge Preserve	0	2	11	0	0	0	**13**
Pushmataha WMA	15	26	11	15	5	2	**74**
Red Slough WMA	31	35	0	0	0	0	**66**
Rita Blanca WMA	0	1	0	6	0	1	**8**
Robbers Cave WMA	1	0	0	1	1	0	**3**
Salt Plains NWR	1	1	18	8	9	3	**40**
Salt Plains NWR Wilderness Area	0	0	14	4	3	0	**21**
Sandhills WMA	5	11	3	2	0	1	**22**
Sandy Sanders WMA	5	11	1	2	6	6	**31**
Sans Bois WMA	6	11	0	3	1	2	**23**
Sardis Lake USACE	0	5	4	0	1	9	**19**
Schultz WMA	1	1	0	2	0	0	**4**
Sequoyah NWR	9	7	0	0	43	5	**64**
Sequoyah NWR (Refuge Island)	0	1	0	0	3	0	**4**
Sequoyah Resort Park	6	1	0	0	12	3	**22**
Shorb WMA	0	0	0	2	0	0	**2**
Skiatook USACE	5	6	7	4	1	0	**23**
Skiatook WMA	10	5	32	30	3	4	**84**
Sparrow Hawk WMA	0	1	5	1	0	0	**7**
Spavinaw WMA (GMA Portion)	15	27	5	16	3	8	**74**
Spavinaw WMA (PHA Portion)	0	1	10	4	3	5	**23**
Stringtown WMA	5	1	1	5	3	1	**16**
Tenkiller USACE	5	11	17	15	4	2	**54**
Tenkiller-B-Cabin WMA	1	2	2	1	3	2	**11**
Texoma USACE	49	52	49	34	15	14	**213**
Texoma USACE (Burns Run)	10	7	2	4	0	0	**23**
Texoma USACE (Lakeside)	11	13	2	5	0	0	**31**
Texoma-Washita Arm WMA	3	5	13	14	5	0	**40**
Three Rivers WMA	43	19	76	64	36	67	**305**
Tishomingo NWR	1	0	23	15	0	2	**41**
Tishomingo WMA	6	6	8	8	0	2	**30**
USDA Grazinglands	0	0	11	4	0	0	**15**
Vanderwork PFA	1	1	1	2	0	0	**5**
Verdigris River USACE	14	14	3	3	0	0	**34**
Washita County WMA	2	1	0	0	0	0	**3**
Washita NWR	0	0	14	3	0	0	**17**
Waurika Lake USACE	12	10	2	0	0	0	**24**
Waurika WMA	55	33	2	0	14	11	**115**
Webbers Fall WMA	4	3	1	0	4	1	**13**
Wichita Mts NWR	5	3	1	3	4	4	**20**
Wister WMA	19	11	33	28	27	41	**159**
Yourman WMA	2	4	6	2	1	4	**19**
Public WMA Total	**1,757**	**1,733**	**1,689**	**1,943**	**948**	**896**	**8,966**

Public Land Contribution

Although ODWC-managed lands, including WMAs and other public properties, comprise only about 4% of the state's total land base, their contribution to the overall deer harvest is disproportionately high relative to their size. These areas provide critical access for hunters who lack private-land opportunities and are managed with an emphasis on habitat quality, wildlife conservation, and public hunting opportunity.

Despite their limited geographic footprint, ODWC-managed properties accounted for 6.7% of Oklahoma's total deer harvest during the 2025–26 season. This notable performance underscores the effectiveness of public land management practices and the important role these areas play within the state's diverse hunting landscape.

Many of these properties support productive deer populations through a combination of varied habitat types, active management techniques such as prescribed burning and food plot development, and carefully regulated hunting pressure. Together, these factors enhance habitat quality and contribute to consistent harvest success. In addition, public lands help ensure that hunting opportunities remain accessible and equitable, regardless of private land ownership.

Comprehensive public-land harvest numbers are presented in **Table 2**, providing a detailed breakdown of performance across individual WMAs and further illustrating the significant role these areas play in Oklahoma's overall wildlife management strategy.

FIGURE 4: ARCHERY HUNTERS AND HARVEST 2004-CURRENT

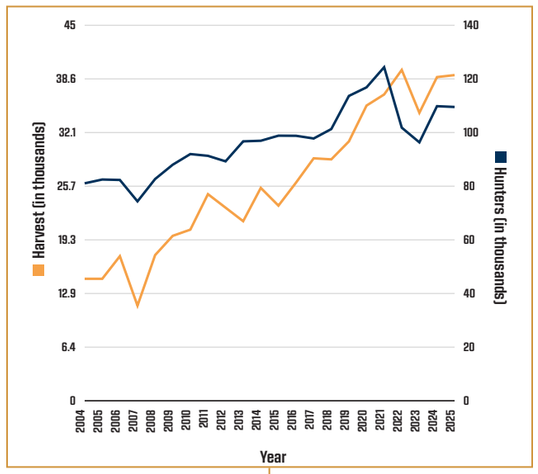
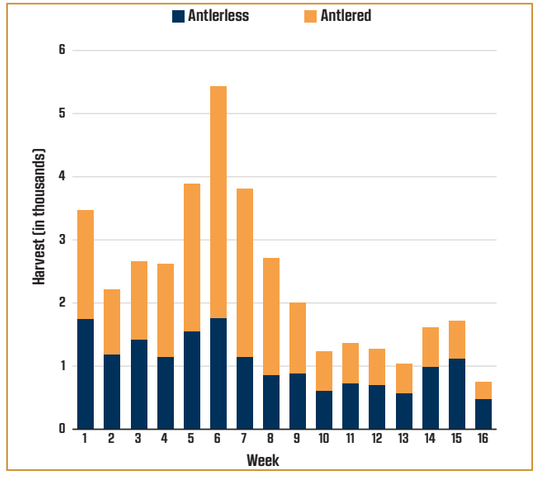


FIGURE 5: 2025-26 ARCHERY HARVEST BY WEEK



Archery Season Overview

The 2025-26 archery deer season again proved to be a major contributor to Oklahoma's overall harvest, with hunters taking 39,084 deer statewide. Although this total fell short of recent record highs, it still represents a strong and consistent level of success, underscoring the continued growth and importance of bowhunting in Oklahoma.

A notable aspect of the archery harvest was its contribution to population management. Antlerless deer made up 43% of the total take by archers, reflecting a continued and intentional focus on doe harvest. This balance is central to sustainable deer management, helping stabilize herd growth and maintain healthy habitat conditions across the state's varied ecosystems.

Participation levels remained high throughout the season, with an estimated 109,810 archery hunters afield, according to ODWC's Game Harvest Survey (GHS). This long-running survey serves as a key tool for tracking participation and harvest trends across all hunting seasons and methods.

Running from Oct. 1, 2025, through Jan. 15, 2026, the archery season provided the longest uninterrupted deer hunting opportunity in the state, spanning more than three months. Regulations allowed for the harvest of up to six deer per hunter, with a maximum of two antlered deer, offering flexibility while still supporting statewide management goals. To further illustrate seasonal dynamics, **Figure 4** highlights long-term trends in both archery harvest and participation, showing how the season has changed over time. **Figure 5** provides a weekly breakdown of harvest activity, offering insight into peak periods of movement and hunter success patterns throughout the season.

Muzzleloader Season Highlights

The 2025-26 muzzleloader deer season ran for nine days from Oct. 25 through Nov. 2. This season again attracted hunters who appreciate the added challenge and traditional appeal of black powder firearms and served as an important component of Oklahoma's comprehensive deer management framework.

Hunters were permitted to harvest up to four deer, with a restriction of no more than one antlered deer per participant. In addition, enhanced bag limits were applied in select antlerless deer zones to further support population management efforts in areas with higher deer densities. These targeted regulations were designed to encourage increased doe harvest where needed to maintain ecological balance. The specific boundaries and regulations for these zones are shown in **Figure 11**.

FIGURE 11: ANTLERLESS DEER ZONES



FIGURE 6: 2025 MUZZLELOADER BY DAY

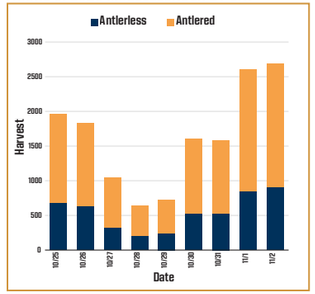
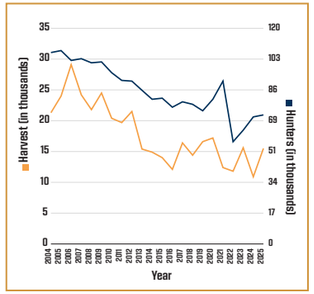


FIGURE 7: MUZZLELOADER HUNTERS AND HARVEST 2004-CURRENT



Participation in the season totaled 70,537 hunters (according to the GHS) who collectively harvested 15,636 deer statewide. This was a significant upswing compared to 2024-25 season harvest of 10,580.

For further context, **Figure 6** provides a daily breakdown of muzzleloader harvest activity, highlighting fluctuations in hunter success and identifying peak harvest periods throughout the season. **Figure 7** presents a long-term view of muzzleloader harvest trends dating to 2004, offering valuable insight into changes in participation and harvest outcomes over time.

Deer Gun Season Overview

Oklahoma's deer gun season, always a key part of the state's hunting traditions, ran for 16 days from Nov. 22 through Dec. 7. This past season followed the same structure as previous years, which allowed hunters to harvest up to four deer, with a restriction of one antlered deer.

When youth deer gun, deer gun, and holiday antlerless deer gun seasons are combined, hunters harvested 79,071 deer statewide. Antlerless deer accounted for 46% of that total. The youth deer gun season contributed 3,669 deer, and the holiday antlerless deer season accounted for 9,366 deer in the overall gun harvest.

Figure 8 and **Figure 9** provide a breakdown of daily harvest activity and long-term trends, while **Figure 10** highlights the harvest history of the holiday antlerless season dating to 2015.

FIGURE 8: 2025 GUN SEASON HARVEST BY DAY

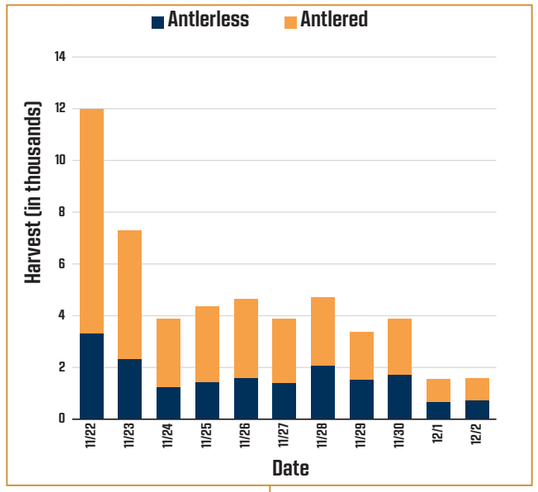


FIGURE 9: GUN HUNTERS AND HARVEST 2004-CURRENT

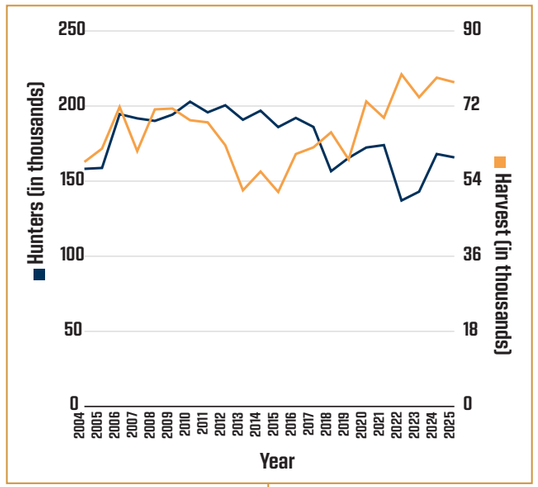
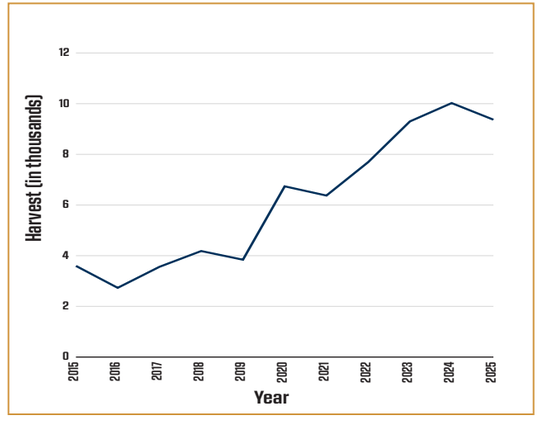


FIGURE 10: HOLIDAY ANTLERLESS DEER GUN SEASON HARVEST 2015-CURRENT



Evaluating Deer Age Structure

To monitor the age composition of Oklahoma's deer population, ODWC uses multiple data sources that together provide a detailed picture of the overall harvest. One key source is the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP), a voluntary, cooperative effort that helps landowners and wildlife managers meet specific habitat and herd management objectives.

Age data are also gathered from several additional channels, including local meat processors, taxidermists, ODWC-managed hunts, and public submissions through ODWC's "Age My Deer" online tool, which allows hunters to upload photos and harvest information for age estimation.

By combining these sources, biologists are able to build a broad and representative sample of deer across the state. This information is used to evaluate the age distribution and overall condition of both antlered and antlerless segments of the population.

Understanding age structure plays an important role in assessing herd health, identifying management priorities, and supporting long-term population sustainability. The resulting analysis helps track changes in herd maturity over time and measures the effectiveness of current harvest strategies, especially when evaluating age structure to maintain a healthy proportion of older, mature deer. These findings directly contribute to future management decisions and harvest recommendations.

Figure 12 and **Figure 13** present the age-class breakdown of antlerless and antlered deer harvested in 2025-26, offering a clear visual representation of the herd's age distribution and overall demographic structure.

Mule Deer

Oklahoma's diverse terrain supports a wide variety of wildlife species, including mule deer. These deer are primarily found in the far western counties, where sightings can be limited and hunting often presents significant challenges.

In the 2025-26 season, hunters harvested 294 mule deer, an uptick compared to 2024-25 season's 209.

To better understand and manage mule deer populations, ODWC is completing a three-year collaborative research project that uses GPS collars to study movement, fawn survival rates, and overall behavior. Results from this study will provide information needed to bolster management of this species within Oklahoma. Harvest totals for mule deer are presented in **Table 3.**

TABLE 3: MULE DEER HARVEST BY COUNTY, SEX, AND METHOD

	Archery		Gun	Muzzleloader	
County	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlered**	**Antlered**	**Total**
Beaver	5	9	59	6	**79**
Cimarron	3	11	81	11	**107**
Ellis	0	2	7	2	**11**
Harmon	0	1	0	0	**1**
Harper	0	3	12	3	**18**
Roger Mills	0	0	7	0	**7**
Texas	0	3	53	8	**65**
Woods	0	1	0	1	**2**
Woodward	0	0	6	0	**6**
Grand Total	**8**	**30**	**225**	**31**	**294**

Elk Season Highlights

Oklahoma's elk population continues to expand gradually, both in number and density in currently occupied areas.

While the highest concentrations remain in established strongholds — particularly in the southwestern region — elk are increasingly being observed and harvested in counties where they were once uncommon or historically absent. This pattern reflects both the species' adaptability and the continued success of habitat conservation and management efforts. At the same time, increasing reports of elk in new areas highlight the ongoing spread of the species and the importance of continued monitoring.

Elk herds in Oklahoma are managed to balance hunting opportunity with long-term sustainability. Hunting is allowed on private land statewide with written permission from landowners, helping ensure responsible harvest and respect for property rights while reducing potential land-use conflicts. The state also conducts controlled hunts on select public lands through a draw system, which regulates pressure and helps maintain stable herd conditions.

In the 2025-26 season, hunters harvested 844 elk across the state. Most were harvested in the Special Southwest Zone (Kiowa, Comanche and Caddo counties), where established herds continue to support consistent hunting opportunities.

A detailed breakdown of elk harvest data, including county distribution, sex of animals taken, and harvest method, is available in **Table 4**. This information provides a clearer picture of harvest patterns and supports informed wildlife management decisions.

FIGURE 12: DOE AGE AT HARVEST 2025-26

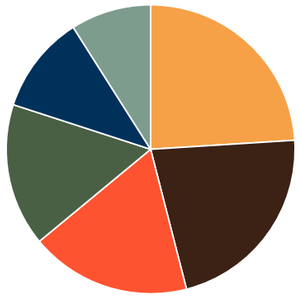


FIGURE 13: BUCK AGE AT HAREST 2025-26

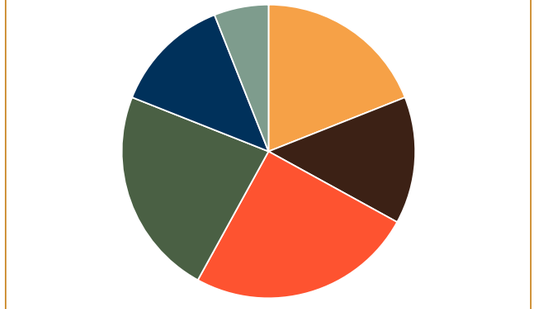



Photo By: Jacob Miller/Provided

Pronghorn Season Summary

Pronghorn among the more unusual big game species in Oklahoma, which is the eastern edge of their historic range. They are largely confined to the open grasslands of the Panhandle, where suitable habitat still resembles the wide, sparsely vegetated plains the species depends on.

Given their limited distribution and relatively small population size, pronghorn harvest in Oklahoma is tightly regulated. Hunting opportunity is provided through a combination of archery permits available over the counter, draw hunts through ODWC's controlled hunts program, and landowner-issued permits within designated areas open to hunting. This structure is designed to distribute opportunity while maintaining careful oversight of the pronghorn population.

During the 2025–26 hunting season, 80 pronghorn were harvested in the Panhandle. While the harvest remains low compared to other big game species, it is consistent with management goals aimed at sustaining a stable, localized population.

A complete breakdown of pronghorn harvest data is presented in **Table 5.**

TABLE 5: PRONGHORN HARVEST BY COUNTY, METHOD AND SEX

	Archery		Gun		
County	**Does**	**Bucks**	**Does**	**Bucks**	**Total**
Cimarron	1	9	22	23	**55**
Texas	0	4	14	7	**25**
Grand Total	**1**	**13**	**36**	**30**	**80**

TABLE 4: ELK HARVEST BY COUNTY, METHOD AND SEX

	Archery		Gun		Muzzleloader		
County	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Antlerless**	**Antlered**	**Total**
Beaver	0	0	0	0	1	0	**1**
Beckham	0	2	6	5	1	0	**14**
Caddo	2	4	32	15	0	0	**53**
Canadian	0	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
Carter	1	4	0	0	0	0	**5**
Cherokee	0	1	2	0	0	0	**3**
Cimarron	0	11	3	24	1	6	**45**
Comanche	34	16	339	187	10	8	**594**
Cotton	0	0	0	1	0	0	**1**
Dewey	0	2	0	0	0	0	**2**
Garfield	0	0	1	0	0	0	**1**
Greer	0	0	2	1	0	0	**3**
Harmon	0	0	0	1	0	2	**3**
Hughes	1	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Johnston	0	2	0	0	0	0	**2**
Kiowa	1	6	46	41	0	0	**94**
Muskogee	1	1	2	1	0	0	**5**
Osage	1	0	0	0	0	0	**1**
Texas	1	3	3	8	0	0	**15**
Grand Total	**42**	**53**	**436**	**284**	**13**	**16**	**844**

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) Update

The 2025-26 big game season marks the third consecutive year Oklahoma hunters and wildlife managers have operated under new management considerations following the detection of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in the state's wild deer populations. The disease was first confirmed in wild free-ranging deer in Texas County and later detected in Woodward County, prompting ongoing concerns due to its potential long-term impacts on deer health and herd sustainability.

In response, ODWC maintained and refined targeted regulations in northwestern Oklahoma, where previous detections have been concentrated. These measures continue to focus on carcass transport restrictions, a critical tool for reducing the risk of spreading infectious prions. Hunters in affected areas are required to follow specific guidelines limiting the movement of certain deer parts outside designated zones, helping reduce the likelihood of disease transmission into unaffected regions.

For the 2025-26 season, ODWC also established a new Selective Surveillance Area (SSA) in McCurtain County. This addition was prompted by the confirmation of a CWD-positive deer harvested in Arkansas within five miles of the Oklahoma border, highlighting the importance of proactive monitoring along state boundaries and potential risk corridors.

A CWD-positive deer was tested in Cimarron County, marking the first hunter harvested CWD-positive deer in the state. This positive deer was harvested within an established SSA, and its location of harvest did not result in the expansion or establishment of another SSA.

To support continued surveillance and early detection, ODWC maintains voluntary testing opportunities within SSAs through a network of freezer drop-off locations. These sites allow hunters to submit samples for CWD testing as part of the broader monitoring effort.

Carcass movement restrictions and voluntary testing programs will continue into the 2026-27 season. Together with hunter participation and ongoing scientific monitoring, these measures create a proactive approach aimed at limiting the spread of CWD and safeguarding the long-term health of Oklahoma's deer populations.

Conclusions

Another round of big game hunting seasons is in the books, and Oklahoma hunters again proved they are among the most dedicated conservationists in the country. The success of the state's deer herd today is not the result of chance — it's the product of thousands of hunters making thoughtful decisions season after season.

Over the years, we've watched Oklahoma's deer herd transform. What once was a restoration success story has become one of the nation's premier deer management achievements. Healthy populations, balanced sex ratios, and an increasing number of mature bucks on the landscape are all signs that hunters are taking an active role in shaping the future of the resource.

This past season continued that trend. Hunters remained committed to harvesting antlerless deer where needed, helping keep local populations in balance with available habitat. At the same time, many hunters continued to pass on young bucks, allowing more deer to reach older age classes and contributing to improved age structure and the quality of hunts across the state.

Of course, our work is never finished. Oklahoma's landscapes and communities continue to change, bringing new challenges and opportunities for wildlife management. Disease concerns, habitat losses, increasing development, and declining participation in hunting are issues that will require attention in the years ahead. Meeting those challenges will depend on the same qualities that have brought us this far: stewardship, adaptability, and a willingness to invest in the future.

As preparations begin for the 2026-27 season, I encourage every hunter to think beyond the next harvest. Introduce someone to hunting. Share a campfire story with a young hunter. Teach safe and ethical hunting practices. The traditions we pass along today will determine the strength of Oklahoma's hunting heritage tomorrow.

Thank you for your continued support of wildlife conservation and responsible deer management. Whether your season is measured by a filled tag, time spent with family and friends, or simply a sunrise from a deer stand, I hope the coming year provides memories that last a lifetime.

Good luck, hunt safely, and enjoy the season ahead.

Hunters Take 54 Bears In State's 2025 Season

BY MATT HENSLEY, SENIOR WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

Hunters took 54 black bear (28 males and 26 females) in Oklahoma in 2025, 23 fewer than the year before.

The drop in harvest is largely attributed to an exceptional, early falling mast crop that made hunting over bait less effective. Because most hunter effort is spent hunting over bait, harvest rates are consistently affected by the natural abundance or shortage of the fall mast crop.

Archery hunters took 49 black bear, while muzzleloader hunters bagged five bear in the open zone that includes all or portions of 12 counties in southeastern Oklahoma that are south of Interstate 40 and east of U.S. 69.

Choctaw Nation wildlife authorities handled bear check-in for tribal members, checking in four (all archery) of the total harvested. Analysis on premolars collected at check-in showed the average age of bear taken in 2025 was about 3.1 years old.

Oklahoma is a bear hunting destination; in addition to the 44 resident hunters who bagged a black bear in 2025, there were seven from Texas, one from Arkansas, one from Alabama, and one from the United Kingdom.

This fall's season is expected to be similar to last year's. Hunters sitting over bait may find themselves competing with the natural mast crop. However, a low-producing or late-falling mast crop could lead to an increase in bait site activity and consequently drive up harvest numbers in 2026.

The 20-bear **muzzleloader quota has been removed,** so hunters are no longer required to call and check the day's quota status before hunting.

Wildlife biologists offer these tips for increasing your chances of taking a black bear:

- Start scouting for hunting spots in September.
- Bears will return to the food source helping them gain the most weight. Acorns, especially from white oaks, are preferred.
- Hunt as early in the season as possible.
- Be scent savvy; bears have an exceptionally keen sense of smell.
- Be patient and persistent; you might have to sit all day or multiple days.
- Stay aware of the weather. Cold, wet conditions make bears less active.
- If the weather is hot and dry, consider hunting near a water source.

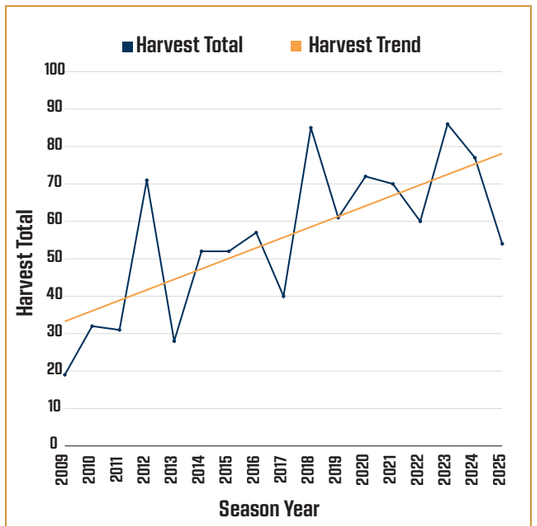
Hunters wanting to pursue a black bear must buy either an archery or muzzleloader bear license before that season opens, unless exempt. By statute, archery bear season is Oct. 1 through the third Sunday in October (which is Oct. 18 this year). Muzzleloader bear season will open Oct. 24 and close Nov. 1. There is no longer any harvest quota for any black bear season.

For more on black bear hunting, consult the Oklahoma Fishing & Hunting Regulations online, in the Go Outdoors Oklahoma mobile app for Apple and Android, or in print free at license dealers statewide.



Photo By: J Stringfield/National Park Service CCO

2009-2025 BEAR HARVEST TREND



2025 OKLAHOMA BEAR HARVEST

	Archery		Muzzleloader		
County	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
Le Flore	12	20	3	0	**35**
Latimer	1	0	0	0	**1**
Pushmataha	8	1	0	0	**9**
McCurtain	2	2	0	2	**6**
Pittsburg	1	1	0	0	**2**
Atoka	1	0	0	0	**1**
Grand Total	**25**	**24**	**3**	**2**	**54**

Conservation for Kids!

Fun Outdoors!

Pretend to see the world as a bug! Use a hula hoop or a piece of string to section off a small circle of grass or dirt. Use a magnifying glass to examine everything within the circle. Count the different types of plants, tiny bugs, soil textures, etc., and write down the things you see that make up your small "ecosystem."

Hunting Tip

Designed to allow hunters to introduce new people to the tradition, Oklahoma's Free Hunting Days will be Sept. 5-6 in 2026. On these days, state residents are able to go hunting without possessing a general hunting license. Open hunting seasons on those days are dove, squirrel, coyote, beaver, raccoon, striped skunk, feral swine, rail, gallinule, prairie dog, and nutria.

Fishing Tip

October is a great time in Oklahoma for explosive topwater fishing action. As bass school up to corral shad against the surface, they become highly aggressive. If you see fish breaking the surface in open water or near shorelines, cast directly into the commotion. Retrieve quickly to mimic a panicked, escaping shad.

Word Search:
Oklahoma's Lakes and Rivers

M	U	O	B	W	K	P	D	K	P	J	A	J	T	D	R
C	I	X	Z	J	N	Y	U	E	E	R	X	Y	E	K	Q
X	M	Y	Z	Z	A	G	G	L	I	K	W	E	A	O	N
I	Q	Z	L	V	K	P	F	O	D	Y	T	P	R	V	G
F	W	Z	U	J	I	O	N	R	D	S	T	E	B	E	V
J	C	W	W	B	R	B	U	P	M	L	N	Z	U	H	F
U	C	K	N	W	U	Z	R	O	L	F	R	J	C	E	O
H	W	I	D	J	A	R	T	O	E	N	M	A	K	Y	R
V	S	Z	M	N	W	E	T	H	K	Z	B	O	L	B	T
M	I	A	S	A	U	S	I	S	Z	E	X	H	E	U	G
C	O	B	H	F	R	L	L	R	C	N	N	Y	S	R	I
Y	N	D	A	T	F	R	A	X	Q	H	G	B	T	N	B
S	I	U	D	A	O	E	O	Z	P	R	I	G	O	R	S
E	L	D	S	O	O	S	I	N	D	Z	P	A	Q	W	O
A	L	D	J	F	J	M	M	A	S	M	K	I	M	F	N
I	I	K	E	Y	S	T	O	N	E	M	B	S	Y	S	J

Find and circle the names of these Oklahoma lakes and rivers.

ARBUCKLES	BROKEN BOW	BURTSCHI
CIMARRON	EUFAULA	FORT GIBSON
HEFNER	HEYBURN	ILLINOIS
KEYSTONE	TOM STEED	WAURIKA

COOL FACTS About Walleye:

- This member of the perch family inhabits most of Oklahoma's major lakes.
- The species was introduced into Oklahoma in the early 1950s in Canton and Tenkiller lakes.
- ODWC traps walleye primarily from Canton Lake every year, harvests eggs and produces more walleye and hybrid saugeye for stocking
- Walleye have no spots on its spiny dorsal fin and pointed teeth in their mouth
- Sauger and saugeye are very similar in appearance to walleye. These two will show spots on the dorsal fin.
- Their eyes are very sensitive to light so they tend to stay deep and feed at night.
- Diet includes insects, larvae, worms, crayfish, snails, and small fish.
- The current state record is 12 pounds 13 ounces, from Robert S. Kerr Reservoir in 2004.

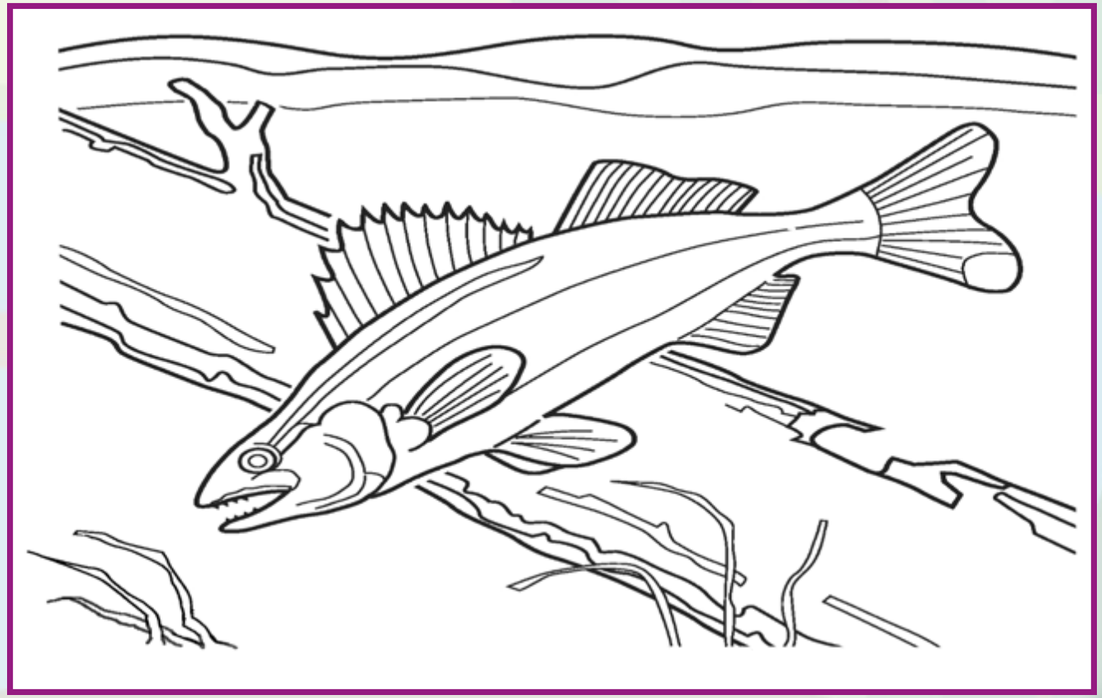
USFWS



SAM STUKEL/USFWS



Color a Critter: Walleye

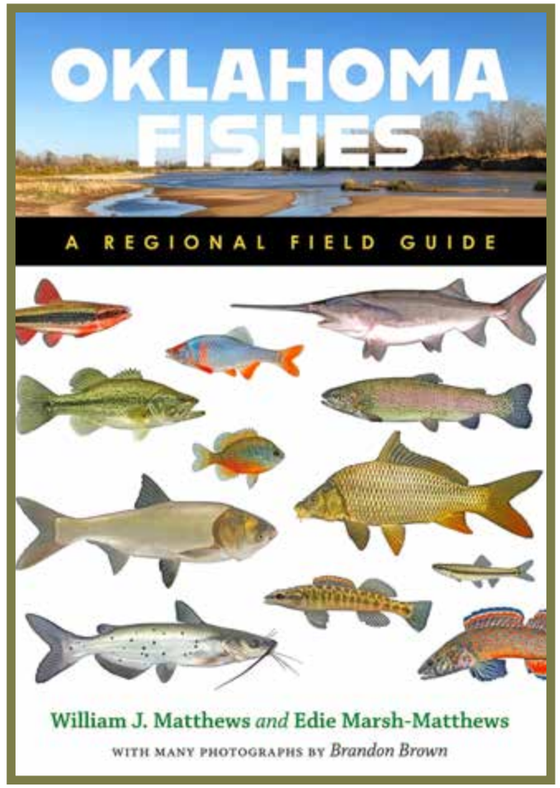


AUTHORS FLOAT REGIONAL APPROACH FOR NEW FISH GUIDE



William Matthews and Edie Marsh-Matthews enjoy spending time exploring the creek behind their home in McClain County.
Photo by: Darrin Hill/ODWC

BY DON P. BROWN,
COMMUNICATION AND
EDUCATION SPECIALIST



About two decades have passed since the last time a field guide to Oklahoma's fishes was released. But this fall, a new guidebook hits the shelves, bringing with it a nontraditional approach to help everyone from experts to novices correctly identify the species at hand.

Oklahoma Fishes: A Regional Field Guide provides identification, distribution and ecology of the fish species that occur in rivers, streams and reservoirs of Oklahoma. Authors William Matthews and Edie Marsh-Matthews, both retired professors from the University of Oklahoma, have sectioned the state into seven regions based on watershed boundaries and fish distribution patterns.

They also simplify species identification by basing it on "suites" of external characteristics (such as body, mouth and fin shape) instead of using dichotomous (yes or no) keys that often require detailed knowledge of fish anatomy to navigate.

The region-specific approach and illustrated identification system make this field guide more user-friendly and accessible to readers when compared to previous field guides. With comprehensive coverage of new species recognized in the past 20 years, updated nomenclature, and more than 660 detailed illustrations, Oklahoma Fishes: A Regional Field Guide is the most up-to-date resource. field guide to fishes inhabiting bodies of water in Oklahoma and the immediate surrounding areas.

Many photos in the book were contributed by Brandon Brown, a fisheries biologist with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. ODWC also provided financial support for printing.

The basic premise of this guide is that not all fish are found in all areas of the state.

Oklahoma is home to more than 180 species of fish, and about half of those species are either minnows or darters. This regional guide allows the reader to narrow down the possibilities based on the region in which the fish is observed.

"Geographically within Oklahoma … there's this tremendous gradient between rich diversity in the east and low diversity in the west. But in the west, you've got some incredibly interesting species that don't occur in the east," William said. "The regional aspect is really, really important because … you don't need to try to figure out what minnow you've got out of 50 if you know in this area there are only 10 likely candidates."



Edie points out a minnow as she and William walk along their backyard creek.
Photo By: Don P. Brown/ODWC



William Matthews and Edie Marsh-Matthews
Photo By: Don P. Brown/ODWC

TUNE IN

WATCH THE MATTHEWSES TALK ABOUT THEIR NEW FISH FIELD GUIDE AND THEN TAKE A SWIM WITH AN 8TH-GRADE "FISH NERD" ON A STREAM SURVEY IN EASTERN OKLAHOMA ON OUTDOOR OKLAHOMA TV. JUST SCAN THE CODE:

BOWHUNTER'S PARADISE

FIND OPPORTUNITIES NOCKING ON OKLAHOMA'S PUBLIC LANDS

BY KELLY ADAMS, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION SUPERVISOR

Oklahoma offers some of the most diverse and rewarding public land opportunities in the United States. From the antelopes of the shortgrass prairie to the elusive black bears in the southeast, Oklahoma is a bowhunter's paradise.

This article covers several aspects of archery hunting Oklahoma's public lands including regulations, preferred habitats of a variety of big game, and specific archery techniques that put meat in the freezer and give you memories that last a lifetime. If you're a bowhunter looking for your next public land hunting adventure, the information provided here will hopefully leave you informed and inspired.

An Archer's Guide to Oklahoma's Public Lands

Oklahoma boasts more than a million acres of public hunting land managed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC). The primary objective for these lands is the sound management and use of Oklahoma's natural resources. The Wildlife Department manages several categories of land, each with its own set of rules.



ATOKA WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA AND PUBLIC HUNTING AREA IN SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA OFFER NEARLY 20,000 ACRES COMBINED. THE AREA'S ROLLING HILLS OF OAK AND HICKORY FOREST PROVIDE QUALITY HABITAT FOR SPECIES INCLUDING DEER, BEAR AND WILD TURKEY.

PHOTO BY: DARRIN HILL/ODWC

Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs)

WMAs are a mainstay of wildlife management in Oklahoma. Often, they are comprised of smaller, more intensely managed units like game management areas (GMA), public hunting areas (PHA), wetland development units (WDU), wildlife management units (WMU), and waterfowl refuge portions (WRP).

Most are open to the public for hunting during statewide seasons, but some have restricted access during controlled hunts or are closed to specific hunting seasons. A comprehensive list of WMAs and their open seasons can be found at wildlifedepartment.com. There, you can filter the list by region, method or species. Another resource is the Oklahoma Fishing and Hunting Regulations guidebook available online or in print where licenses are sold.

An added bonus for archers: Several WMAs offer practice ranges with towers to simulate tree stand shooting. Atoka, Copan and Kaw have archery towers, and under construction are towers at Canton and Lexington.

Oklahoma Land Access Program (OLAP)

Oklahoma's OLAP program provides a unique, and sometimes underutilized, opportunity for hunters to access privately owned land that has been leased by the Wildlife Department. Finding an OLAP property to hunt or fish starts with the OLAP map directory at wildlifedepartment.com. Zoom in and click on a boundary to see the access type, likely species present, type of cover or habitat, and total acreage of the property.

When visiting an OLAP property, it is important to understand OLAP functions differently than private land and Wildlife Management Areas. OLAP properties allow different types of access types, each with its own set of regulations and allowable activities. Here is a breakdown of a few access types.

Walk-in Hunting Area (archery or shotgun only)

The majority of properties enrolled in the OLAP are walk-in hunting areas open to archery or shotgun hunting (no buck shot or slugs). These properties are open to hunters with a land access permit for all hunting seasons besides elk season and are accessible Sept. 1 through May 16.

Limited Access

Limited access areas restrict the number of hunters that may access a property at a given time, which provides a better experience to hunters and property owners in high-traffic areas. To access, hunters must check in and out at GoOutdoorsOklahoma.com. These areas are open to all hunting seasons besides elk season and are accessible Sept. 1 through May 16. These areas are also limited to archery or shotgun hunting (no buck shot or slugs).

Antelope Controlled Hunt Access

These properties provide access for hunters drawn for antelope gun hunts through the controlled hunts applications. Bowhunters however, can get an over-the-counter antelope license and hunt any OLAP property west of State Highway 136.

Other access types that are not open to hunting include Walk-in Fishing Area, Walk-in Stream Area and Wildlife Viewing Area. A hunting or fishing license and an annual land access permit are required for all OLAP properties, unless exempt.

Public Land Regulations

WMAs can sometimes feel crowded, especially during opening weekends. However, archery hunting offers fewer crowds, a longer season and a hefty bag limit letting you put more meat in the freezer. But a hunter's success, enjoyment and safety depend on everyone respecting the rules. The best resource for understanding various rules is the Oklahoma Fishing and Hunting regulations guidebook available online or in print wherever hunting or fishing licenses are sold. The following rules are not an exhaustive list, so be sure to review the regulations guidebok.



THE REQUIREMENT FOR ARCHERY HUNTERS TO WEAR HUNTER ORANGE IS IN EFFECT WHEN ANY BIG GAME FIREARMS SEASON IS ALSO OPEN.

PHOTO BY: USFWS

Hunter Orange

One of the most critical safety regulations for bowhunters is the hunter orange requirement. Archery season spans several months, and so it overlaps with several big game firearms seasons, which is when the hunter orange rules apply.

Bowhunters must wear either a hunter orange head covering or outer garment above the waist whenever a firearms season (muzzleloader or gun) is open. This also includes the youth gun season and the holiday antlerless season.

The rule also applies whether hunting on public or private land.



CIMARRON HILLS WMA OFFERS QUINTESSENTIAL VIEWS OF OKLAHOMA'S MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE. THE 3,770-ACRE WMA HAS ONE PRIMITIVE CAMPING AREA NORTHWEST OF ITS HEADQUARTERS.

PHOTO BY: WILDLIFEDEPARTMENT.COM

Camping

Many WMAs offer primitive camping. Though these campsites do not include restrooms, running water or electricity, they provide unique access to some of the state's most scenic landscapes.

- **Designated Areas:** Most WMAs restrict camping to specific designated areas rather than allowing it anywhere on the property.
- **Hunters/Anglers Only:** On WMAs where camping is allowed, it is often restricted to individuals possessing a valid hunting or fishing license.
- **Time Limits:** In areas where camping is permitted, the stay is typically limited to a maximum of 16 consecutive days.
- **Seasonal Restrictions:** Some areas, like Cookson WMA or Packsaddle WMA, only allow camping during specific open hunting seasons.

Tree Stands

Tree stands provide bowhunters a significant advantage, especially on highly pressured WMAs. While the Department does allow the placing of tree stands on its public lands, tree stand owners should be aware that their stand does not give them exclusive hunting rights to that area.

Additionally, the use of tree stands is subject to specific regulations to protect resources and ensure fair access for all hunters.

Rules include:

- All tree stands must be portable.
- The use of any device that pierces the bark of a tree, such as screw-in steps, spikes or bolts, is strictly prohibited.
- Tree stands must be clearly marked with the hunter's name and address or their ODWC customer identification number.
- Stands may be placed on a WMA no more than 14 days before the opening of the relevant hunting season. And stands must be removed from the WMA within 14 days after the close of the season.



TREE STANDS MAY BE PLACED ON WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS AND MUST BE PROPERLY LABELED.

PHOTO BY: USFWS

Deer

In Oklahoma, bowhunters have access to more than 100 public areas open to archery deer hunting. The vast majority of those areas are open during the statewide season Oct. 1 through Jan. 15, giving hunters 107 days of hunting. That is slightly more than 35 percent of a full calendar year!

Two species of deer are found in Oklahoma: white-tailed deer and mule deer. While white-tailed deer are common statewide and thrive in Oklahoma's forests and fields, mule deer are specialized residents of the wide-open prairies and rugged mesas of western Oklahoma.

The statewide archery season limit is six deer. No more than two may be antlered.

White-tailed Deer

A primary challenge for any public land hunters is deciding where to hunt. This is especially true for white-tailed deer which are found statewide. Good white-tailed deer hunting can be found at just about any WMA for those willing to put in the time. WMAs with relatively high deer harvest specifically for the archery season include Fort Gibson, Waurika, Keystone, Cross Timbers and Oologah.



OKLAHOMA TYPICALLY SEES AN ANNUAL HARVEST OF AROUND 120,000 DEER AND ABOUT ONE-THIRD OF THAT HARVEST IS ATTRIBUTED TO BOWHUNTERS.

PHOTO BY: JUSTIN VINYARD/PROVIDED

Canton WMA is a great choice for hunters looking for options relatively close to Oklahoma City. This WMA is less than 100 miles northwest of Oklahoma City and has a lot to offer bowhunters. It surrounds the majority of Canton Lake and provides densely vegetated bottomland habitat. A recently renovated archery range and tower provide hunters a place to practice. Primitive camping is available at designated areas along access roads on the area. Additionally, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages developed campgrounds with RV hookups around the lake.

Although it has its challenges, Black Kettle WMA is a great place for spot-and-stalk archery or those looking to explore Oklahoma's western landscape. More than 100 scattered units of rolling hills, shinnery oak and red-dirt canyons comprise the WMA's unique topography.

At 30,710 acres, it is the second-largest WMA in southwestern Oklahoma behind Sandy Sanders WMA. Black Kettle WMA is contained in the Black Kettle National Grassland and is one of Oklahoma's most popular public hunting areas. Although this can mean large crowds during opening weekend of gun season, bowhunters often feel like they have the whole place to themselves. But be warned: Archery hunting on this WMA has its challenges and can be physically demanding. A successful hunt requires a lot of planning and scouting.



SOME OF THE LANDSCAPE AT BLACK KETTLE WMA.

PHOTO BY: WILDLIFEDEPARTMENT.COM



ABOUT 200 MULE DEER ARE HARVESTED ANNALLY IN OKLAHOMA WITH BOWHUNERS MAKING UP ABOUT 15 PERCENT OF THE HARVEST.

PHOTO BY: JEREMIAH ZURENDA/COURTESY

Mule Deer

When bowhunters think of Oklahoma hunting, images of dense oak forest, thick river bottoms and white-tailed deer typically come to mind. However, the state's far western horizon paints an entirely different picture.

In the Oklahoma Panhandle, among rocky mesas and scrubby junipers, lives the mule deer. This close relative of the white-tailed deer is unfamiliar to most Oklahomans, but in the western part of the United States, it is a familiar sight.

Although ODWC manages several WMAs where mule deer can be found, populations are localized so hunters must be prepared to log many miles.

Most public land mule deer are harvested from Beaver River WMA in Beaver County. This property spans over 28,000 acres and is comprised of sand sage grasslands, rolling sandhills and scattered sand plum thickets.

Conquering these wide-open spaces requires a dramatic shift in strategy from traditional whitetail hunting. Many hunters rely heavily on the spot-and-stalk method. And because the cover is sparse and shot distances frequently stretch well past 40 yards, archers must be exceptionally proficient at extended ranges and well-practiced in shooting from kneeling or awkward positions.

And while mule deer hunting in western Oklahoma has been kept relatively secret, its popularity has grown over the years. Additional public lands for bowhunters to consider include Ellis County, Rita Blanca and Optima WMAs.

STUDY ONGOING

For several years, ODWC has been conducting research focusing on the health of the state's mule deer. The effort includes netting and electronically tagging does and collecting biological samples.

The data collected will help Wildlife Department biologists better understand how mule deer use the habitat and factors determining their distribution and abundance to ensure proper management.



THE STATE HAS A HEALTHY, HUNTABLE POPULATION OF BLACK BEAR IN SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA.

PHOTO BY: JUSTIN AVERY/PROVIDED

Black Bear

The presence of black bear in Oklahoma is a reminder that this state provides some of the most diverse habitat in the country. The fact that people have a chance to see and hunt black bear in the wild adds to the reasons why Oklahoma really is among the best places to live and hunt.



THREE RIVERS WMA IN SOUTHEASTERN OKLAHOMA IS PRIVATELY OWNED TIMBERLAND LEASED TO ODWC FOR PUBLIC HUNTING ACCESS. AN EXTRA PERMIT HELPS COVER THE LEASE FEES PAID BY ODWC.

PHOTO BY: DARRIN HILL/ODWC

Southeastern Oklahoma's Ouachita Mountains host a thriving bear population. Each year, hunters typically harvest about 80 bear during archery and muzzleloader seasons. Most bear are harvested in Le Flore County, which includes parts of the Ouachita, Winding Stair and Kiamichi mountains. Popular WMAs in the heart of bear country include Ouachita-Le Flore Unit, Honobia Creek, Three Rivers, Ouachita-McCurtain Unit and Pine Creek WMAs.

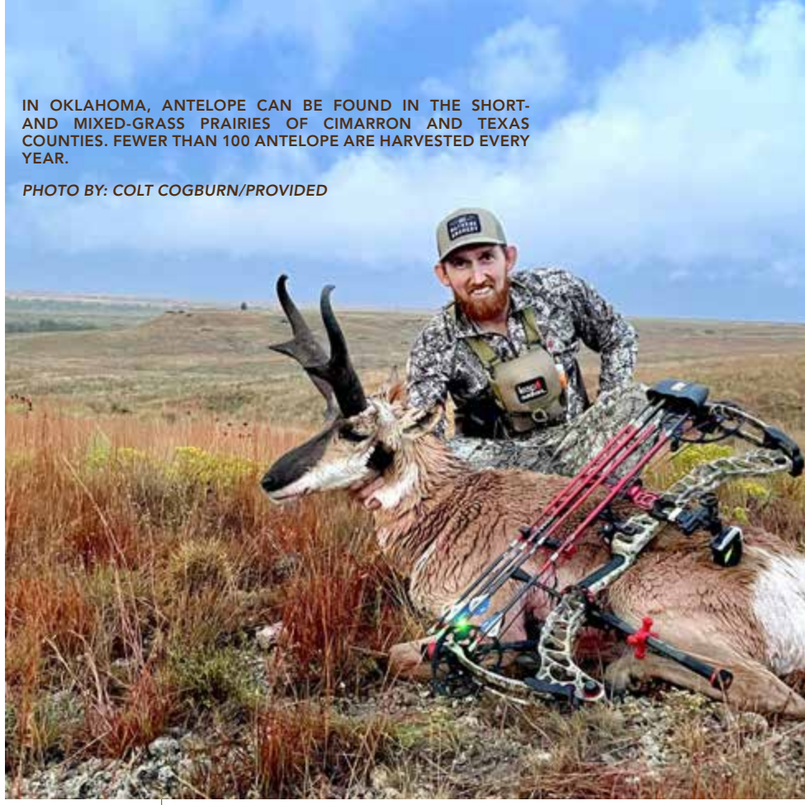
Unlike private land, baiting is prohibited on WMAs. Hunters are only allowed to hunt over natural food sources. And so, spot-and-stalk may be a good strategy, especially if natural food sources are plentiful. However, a bear's preferred habitat of rugged, pine-covered hills and hardwood draws makes this strategy a physically demanding challenge for bowhunters.

Another option is to locate an area with fresh bear sign and stay there. Be prepared to sit there all day or continue to hunt that spot across several days. Bears will return to whatever food source is helping them gain the most weight, and on public land, that is usually acorns from white oaks.

Bowhunters wanting to pursue black bear must purchase a bear archery license before the season starts, unless they have a lifetime license. Bear archery season runs from Oct. 1 through the third Sunday in October.

A hunter's combined season limit for archery and muzzleloader season is one bear.

Totaling nearly 185,000 acres, Three Rivers WMA in southeastern Oklahoma is the second-largest WMA in the state, second to Ouachita WMA. It is the premier destination for hunters wanting to pursue deer and black bear in a single trip. It is a wilderness of managed timber, pine plantations and hardwood corridors. Because of its size, you can truly get away from other hunters. To help cover the cost of leasing this land, a annual Land Access Permit is required to access the area.



IN OKLAHOMA, ANTELOPE CAN BE FOUND IN THE SHORT- AND MIXED-GRASS PRAIRIES OF CIMARRON AND TEXAS COUNTIES. FEWER THAN 100 ANTELOPE ARE HARVESTED EVERY YEAR.

PHOTO BY: COLT COGBURN/PROVIDED

Antelope

Antelope offer the most challenging archery hunt in the state. Getting within range without being spotted is an exercise in extreme patience as they can detect movement up to four miles away. Antelope are skittish and quick to react. At the sound of a bowstring, they can drop their chest toward the ground to begin a sprint almost instantly, causing an arrow to sail right over their back. Known for their speed, they can sprint as fast as 60 miles per hour, making them the fastest land animals in North America.

Hunters interested in archery hunting for antelope on public land can try their luck at the 15,000-acre Rita Blanca WMA or at more than 50 OLAP properties scattered across Cimarron and Texas counties. Each property averages about 400 acres. Hunters pursuing antelope on OLAP properties don't need to have written landowner permission, but they do need a Land Access Permit.

Located in the extreme corner of Oklahoma's Panhandle, Rita Blanca WMA is scattered into 46 units over 26 miles and more than 15,000 acres along the Oklahoma-Texas border. The land here is dry. The average annual precipitation for the area is just about 18 inches (compare that to 56 inches in the southeastern part of the state). And while these conditions are too harsh for most species, antelope do quite well here.

Waterhole blinds are the most successful archery tactic. Locate an isolated stock tank or water source with fresh antelope tracks, set up a blind and wait. Antelope are creatures of habit and will often get water during the heat of the day.

Another tactic is to use a 2D or 3D antelope buck decoy that could potentially trigger a territorial response. A nearby buck may charge the decoy, moving from 400 yards away to 40 yards in seconds.

The most difficult strategy is spot-and-stalk. This requires hours of glassing and hundreds of yards of crawling across prairie. Some hunters will use a cow-shaped silhouette decoy to allow them to walk diagonally across open ground toward a herd without spooking them.

The antelope archery season runs from Oct. 1-14. The combined season limit is two. No more than one may be a buck.

Conclusion

Archery hunting in Oklahoma is a test of perseverance, knowledge and respect for the resource. Whether you are going after an antelope in the wide-open spaces of the Panhandle, or climbing a blackjack oak in the central plains, the opportunities on public land are plentiful for those willing to do the work.

- Use digital scouting tools like ODWC's digital atlas, OnX or HuntStand to look for places where the terrain (like a cliff or a river) forces deer into a narrow path. In the southeast, look for pinch points between clearcuts.
- Be ready to move to your Plan B or Plan C spot.
- Communication with other hunters can sometimes turn a crowded area into a coordinated effort to move game toward each other.
- Be ready for a physical hunt. Dragging a buck out of a creek bed can be grueling, especially on a warm October day.
- Hunting public land is an investment of time. Be willing to travel, depending on your location. Only a few WMAs are less than a two-hour drive from Oklahoma City, while at least a half-dozen are about an hour's drive from Tulsa.

GETTING THEIR FEET WET

Guided Youth Hunts Open Doors to Waterfowl Hunting

By Heather Del Moral, Communication and Education Technician

For many people, waterfowl hunting can seem overwhelming. Between decoys, duck calls, regulations and special gear, getting started can feel intimidating. For youths who don't have a family member or mentor to show them the ropes, that challenge can seem even bigger.

That's why the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation offers guided youth waterfowl hunts across the state. Designed for ages 12 to 15, these special hunts provide young hunters with the opportunity to experience waterfowl hunting alongside experienced guides who handle the details and teach the skills needed to get started.

Drawings are used to award these hunts to youth applicants who have completed a certified hunter education course. Participants need only themselves and an accompanying adult guardian.

Mallards, Mentors, Memories

For 12-year-old Ryatt, the opportunity was an easy "yes" when his dad asked if he wanted to apply for the chance to be drawn for a youth hunt.

After learning he had been selected, Ryatt was excited and ready to go.



PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC

YOUTH HUNTER RYATT AND HIS DAD WATCH FROM THE DUCK BLIND AS GUIDE PAXTON SMITH MAKES SOME ADJUSTMENTS.

Ryatt's hunting guide was Wildlife Biologist Paxton Smith, who studies waterfowl and helps manage Oklahoma's migratory birds. Ryatt expected to learn about hunting, but what he did not expect was a behind-the-scenes look at the work that goes into conserving waterfowl.

When Ryatt was asked about what he learned from Smith on his hunt, he said, "Mainly what his job was and what he did with waterfowl."

The hunt was exciting. Ryatt saw a ton of birds, including mallards, geese, and even a kingfisher.

He said the best moment of the day was "watching mallards cupping in at daybreak."

For waterfowl hunters, few sights are more memorable than ducks setting their wings and dropping into the decoys as the sun rises over the marsh. It is a scene that often turns first-time hunters into lifelong outdoor enthusiasts.

Ryatt also practiced important firearm safety skills throughout the hunt.

"Make sure your gun is always pointed in a safe direction and on safety," Ryatt said.

Smith said building confidence and safe hunting habits are among the primary goals of the guided youth waterfowl program.

"We want kids to leave with the confidence to go out and hunt safely and responsibly on their own," he said.

These hunts are especially valuable for families interested in hunting but unsure about how to start.

"The most rewarding hunts are when both the youth and their guardian are interested in hunting but lack experience. This allows us to teach them the basics together and give them a solid foundation to continue on their own," Smith said.

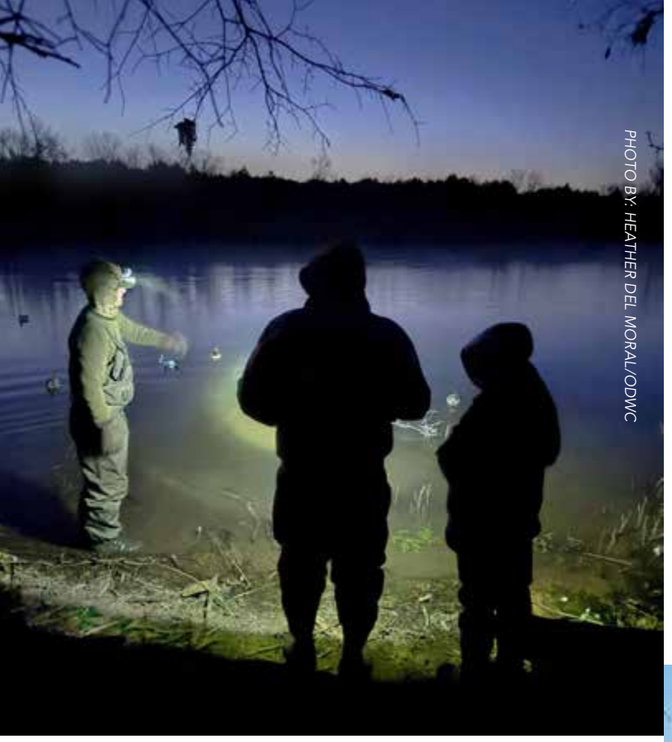


PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC

Hunt guide Paxton Smith teaches Ryatt and his dad, Josh, about setting a spread of duck decoys.

Outdoor Classroom

Beyond hunting skills, the program provides opportunities to learn about conservation. Waiting in the blind for the ducks to show up creates moments for guides to discuss wildlife management, migration, habitat and the role that hunters play in conservation.

"Understanding how ducks live and migrate helps kids become better hunters and better conservationists," Smith said.

For Ryatt, the hunt left a lasting impression. "I almost got a double," he said with a smile.

Asked if he wanted to go waterfowl hunting again, he immediately said, "Yes, it was so much fun!"

Ryatt's advice for other kids considering trying to hunt for the first time: "Go. It is a great experience."

Smith hopes more families will take that advice.

"Let them give it a try," he said. "Hunting teaches patience, planning, responsibility and respect for nature. It gives kids a productive outdoor activity that can become a lifelong passion."

As someone whose own hunting journey began on an ODWC youth hunt, Smith understands the major impact these opportunities can have.

"Being involved in these hunts allows me to continue that cycle and hopefully inspire the next generation of hunters and conservation professionals."

For Ryatt, what started as a guided youth hunt became a day filled with new experiences, new knowledge, and memories of mallards gliding in at sunrise.

For Oklahoma youth who have ever wondered what waterfowl hunting is all about, a guided youth hunt might be the perfect place to start.

Ryatt, 12, got a taste of waterfowl hunting on his ODWC guided hunt

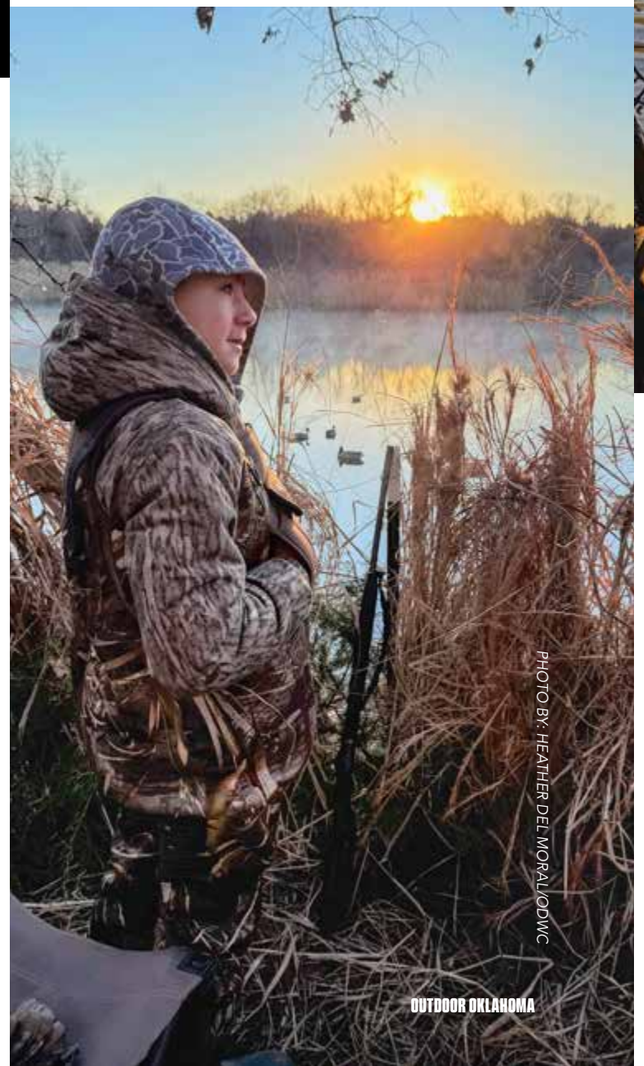


PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC



PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC

Youth hunter Ryatt eagerly waits as guide Paxton Smith returns with a harvested duck.

Hunter Education

The Wildlife Department's hunter education course teaches students to hunt safely and provides eligible hunters with full hunting license purchase and hunting privileges. Hunter education-certified hunters can buy any hunting license and hunt big game and small game alone (except for youth participating in youth deer gun season must adhere to accompanying adult requirements).

Some people are exempt from needing hunter education certification: anyone 31 or older; anyone on active duty or honorably discharged from the U.S. armed forces; and National Guard members.

Students 10 or older needing hunter education are encouraged to take the free course online at wildlifedepartment.com/education/hunter-ed/online-hunter-ed. Any youth 9 and younger is required to hunt under an apprentice license but can still take the hunter education course without the ability to test for hunter ed certification.

If your hunter education card is lost or destroyed, you may buy a duplicate card by logging on to gooutdoorsoklahoma.com.

Oklahoma's hunter ed certification is recognized and honored in all 50 states and all provinces in Canada.



PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC

Father, Josh, 12-year-old Ryatt and Wildlife Biologist Paxton Smith proudly display several ducks harvested on the boy's ODWC guided waterfowl hunt.

Guide Paxton Smith and Ryatt admire a mallard.



PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC



The guided hunt for Ryatt, 12, was a great success as he took home a daily limit of mallards.

PHOTO BY: HEATHER DEL MORAL/ODWC

Apply Now for Guided Hunts

About 15-20 hunts that take place each year depending on staff availability to some degree and to a larger degree conditions of the wetlands.

The Wildlife Department provides young new waterfowl hunters a special opportunity to go on a guided waterfowl hunts at sites across the state. The program seeks youths who want to hunt but don't have a hunting mentor.

Applicants must be 12 to 15 years old, have proof of successfully completing a certified hunter education course, and have an adult guardian who can accompany them on the hunt.

This year's hunt locations are Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area, Fort Cobb State Park, Fort Gibson Lake, Hackberry Flat WMA, Keystone Lake and Vann's Lake.

To access the application form, click on the QR code. For more information, contact Jason Rockwell at (405) 406-2675 or jason.rockwell@odwc.ok.gov

Application deadline: Nov. 3, 2026



An endangered species with an estimated population of 383 in the wild, whooping cranes occur only in North America and is the continent's tallest bird.
Photo By: Klaus Nigge/USFWS

WHOOPING CRANES WINTER IN OKLAHOMA

For The First Time at Salt Plains Refuge

BY Evan Monnett,
USFWS Public Affairs Specialist

"I first realized we may be observing a new whooping crane behavior during our yearly Christmas bird count," said Glen Hensley, a wildlife biologist at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge. "We had multiple groups of volunteer surveyors report whooping crane sightings on Jan. 3, the latest they had ever stayed at the refuge. It wasn't until then I realized the whoopers were hanging around and might remain here for the whole winter."

Small numbers of whooping cranes have stayed late into December at Salt Plains before, but they've always headed south for their traditional wintering grounds at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge before the new year. With the insights provided by community scientists, Hensley kept a close eye on the small flock to see if they would stick around or take off for Texas.

In late January, an arctic blast pushed into Oklahoma, bringing with it temperatures in the single digits and around 8 inches of snow. Many of the whooping crane researchers thought that this frigid weather may prompt the cranes to continue south to the warmer coast. As temperatures dropped and snow fell, Hensley thought he likely wouldn't see these birds again until next fall.

"After things had thawed out, I headed to the refuge thinking the cranes had probably moved on," Hensley said. "But on my drive in, I saw the full group, grazing on scrap corn on the snowy ground of their favorite field."

The cranes stuck around all winter, with a dedicated group of service biologists and community scientists keeping a close tab on them before they flew north in early March.

A Population on the Climb

Since 1938, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have been tracking the number of wintering whooping cranes at Aransas. This species was perilously close to disappearing from the wild in 1941, when only 14 adults and two juveniles were counted at Aransas. But dedicated conservation efforts, including partnerships conserving habitat throughout the central Great Plains, have helped whooping crane numbers steadily climb. Today their population exceeds 550 individuals.

As the whooping crane population has increased, so has their usage of habitat away from their core wintering grounds. Scientists have noted this behavior in recent wintering ground surveys, with crane observations demonstrating a range expansion to habitats surrounding Aransas. Over the past decade, another growing group of whooping cranes has been wintering over 30 miles inland from the typical estuarine marsh habitat. Individual cranes have even been observed staying on the Texas coast all summer, despite the intense Texas summer heat.

"As the population climbs, we are seeing these iconic cranes exhibit new behaviors," said Kevin McAbee, USFWS whooping crane coordinator. "These resilient birds are showcasing their adaptability, something that will help them adjust to changing landscapes. Each year, these whooping cranes seem to do something we haven't observed in the last 100 years. It is exciting that this species continues to remind us that we have lots to learn about their ecology and behavior."

While this is the first observation of a group of whooping cranes stopping their southern migration in Oklahoma, it is part of a behavioral trend among migratory birds that biologists have noticed. As winter weather has become less predictable, migratory birds have adjusted by lingering farther north, making the conservation of wetlands and grasslands in the Central Flyway even more important.

Managing With Whoopers in Mind

The Central Flyway is a major bird migration corridor over the Central Great Plains, from the Canadian prairie provinces to the Gulf Coast, providing essential habitat for resident species and millions of migrants. Maintaining protection for places that retain water, like prairie potholes in the north and playa lakes



A CLOSE-UP VIEW OF A WHOOPING CRANE PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE INTERNATIONAL CRANE FOUNDATION IN BARBABOO, WIS. THEY HAVE DISTINCT RED CRESTS AND DARK MALAR STRIPES, OR LINES, UNDER EACH EYE.

PHOTO BY: RYAN HAGERTY/USFWS



EIGHT ENDANGERED WHOOPING CRANES OVERWINTERED IN OKLAHOMA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 2025-26.

PHOTO BY: ALBUS FAM/INATURALIST CC-BYNC4

in the south, is vital to migratory bird conservation. Whooping cranes need wetlands and foraging habitats that meet their needs at least every 185 miles, making places like Salt Plains NWR an oasis in an often otherwise dry landscape.

Salt Plains was designated as critical habitat for the whooping crane in 1978. Its expansive salt flats and shorelines provide ideal habitat for the elusive cranes that tend to avoid brush and other features that may hide predators.

The refuge has been hard at work in past years to conserve this important habitat. One ongoing project is the management and treatment of salt cedar. This hardy, invasive shrub can withstand the high salinity soil in and around the salt flats, allowing it to encroach into habitats that native plants cannot. Removing salt cedars helps preserve the salt flats for species such as whooping cranes and snowy plovers (more than 20 percent of the snowy plovers continental breeding population nests on the refuge).

Refuge Manager Shane Kasson is excited to see the increased use by whooping cranes. "This tells us that that we're on the right path, that we're providing suitable habitat for them, which is what we're here to do. Its validation that we are doing the right work."

Community Science

USFWS biologists continue to work toward the recovery goals outlined in the 2007 International Recovery Plan for Whooping Crane, and the contributions of birders and conservationists are helping the recovery move forward.

Each year, members of the public report whooping crane sightings. These sightings are confirmed by professionals, informing biologists about migration timing, locations and habits. This shared information improves species monitoring, which in turn benefits guidance provided to habitat managers.

"This information helps us improve project recommendations for the benefit of the cranes and develop better guidance to avoid, minimize and mitigate adverse effects, conserving the species on both fronts," said wildlife biologist Matt Rabbe, who collects and analyzes whooping crane sightings for the USFWS.



Biologists were excited to discover that eight whooping cranes spent the entire winter at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge.
Photo By: Bryan Box/INaturalist CC-BYNC$

In Oklahoma, whooping crane sightings may be reported online to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation at wildlifedepartment.com/wildlife/report-wildlife.



Whooping cranes feed on scrap corn in deep snow near the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge during a January cold spell.
Photo By: Glen Hensley/USFW





Endangered whooping cranes migrate through Oklahoma each fall and spring, and the public is urged to report sightings of the rare birds.
Photo By: Creston Bunch/iNatrualist CC-BYNC4

While anyone can help biologists learn more about whooping cranes, it is important to make sure that observations by the public don't accidentally disturb them. Do not approach whooping cranes or exit vehicles to approach them. Please maintain a distance of at least a quarter-mile, as the cranes can easily be startled.

As the population climbs, these birds are finding ways to make the environment their own. Their use of new habitats increases the resiliency of the species, ensuring the population isn't completely reliant on just a few key areas.

Once they establish wintering and nesting sites, whooping cranes tend to have very strong site fidelity, often returning year after year to the same spots. Staff at Salt Plains NWF have worked hard to maintain habitat that is conducive to whooping cranes' life needs and are excited to see what the cranes choose to do this fall.

"With the dedicated assistance of hundreds of volunteer observers, we will continue to monitor the whooping crane population as they travel through the Central Flyway," McAbee said. "We are waiting with anticipation to see if these eight pioneer cranes decide to winter at Salt Plains again, and if others may eventually decide to follow their example."

"I was surprised to see whooping cranes wintering this far north, but I wasn't surprised they chose Salt Plains," Kasson said. In these salt flats reminiscent of the Texas coast, maybe these whoopers felt right at home.

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***Prices listed on these pages do not include $3 online ordering convenience fee.*



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Double-wall high-grade stainless steel 16-oz coffee mugs and 20-oz tumblers made by Yukon with DuraGrip powder coat finish featuring the new ODWC arrowhead logo. Tumblers come in navy, white, and bottomland camo; mugs come in olive drab and navy. They are vacuum-insulated and BPA-free. (Online sales only.) — $20

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This handsome high-capacity dry bag sports the ODWC shield. Measuring 28 by 15 by 9 inches, it has four pockets and a rugged exterior shell. — $80







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Dress up your vehicle while showing your support of our great state's wildlife resources by getting a wildlife license plate. Nine Wildlife Conservation Plates are available to serve as your regular, rear-bumper license plate. The plates cost just $41.60 (original or replacement) above your regular annual registration fee with proceeds going to Oklahoma's Wildlife Diversity Program. The forms are available at local tag agencies, or online at tinyurl.com/wildlifetag.



OUTDOOR OKLAHOMA T-SHIRTS

Show that you support ODWC's magazine and TV show with these logo tees! These Bella unisex soft shirts are machine-washable and come in two designs: white with logo, and black with angler and logo. — $25.

ODWC LOGO WATER BOTTLE

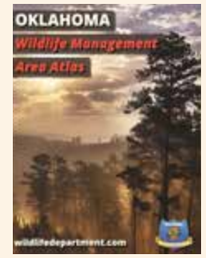
Made of high-grade 18/8 (304) stainless steel, this ODWC-logo 32-ounce bottle is highly durable and corrosion-resistant. With copper plate insulation and double-wall vacuum seal, it keeps beverages cold for 24 hours or hot for up to 6 hours. Includes Sip 'n Chug Leakproof Lid. — $27



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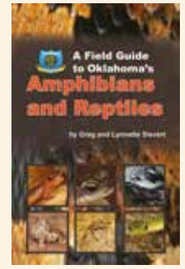


OKLAHOMA WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA ATLAS

The Wildlife Management Area Atlas presents maps of Oklahoma's WMAs and ODWC-owned fishing lakes. At 109 pages, the atlas features lands purchased before 2018. Each map shows special features such as parking sites, camping areas, and food plots. Your atlas purchase comes with a bonus one-year subscription to the award-winning *Outdoor Oklahoma* magazine. — $25

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Oklahoma "duck stamps" are always popular with collectors and hunters. While each year's stamp features a different handsome design sure to add appeal to any stamp collection, funds from stamp sales are used for many kinds of waterfowl management projects. 2025-26 stamp on sale in August. — $21 or $31

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NUTRIA

BY KINSEY MATLOCK, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION INTERN

The nutria (*Myocastor coypus*) is a large, semi-aquatic, fur-bearing rodent native to South America. The nutria was brought to the United States in 1889 for its fur to be sold in the fur markets. When this market crashed, many sellers released these animals into the wild due to not being able to take care of them. Upon the release of the rodent, it soon became considered invasive in the United States and is considered established in 17 states.

To identify this rodent, look for its brown fur, long orange front teeth, mouse-like tail, partially webbed hind feet, and its high-set eyes and ears that are valvular, which means they can be closed to prevent the entry of water when swimming.

Nutria is a non-native invasive species in Oklahoma.

This rodent is commonly mistaken as a beaver or a muskrat due to its shape and color. Nutria have an average weight of 12 pounds and are about 2 feet in body length with a round tail that adds another 12-18 inches to its length.

Mature nutria are smaller than beavers but larger than muskrats. The male nutria is slightly larger than the female.

Males reach sexual maturity between 4-9 months; females take 3-9 months. For females, the gestation period is only 130 days. So, within one year, a nutria can produce two litters and be pregnant with a third. Females are able to breed again within a day of having their litter. The number of young ranges between 1-13 in a litter, but the average is 4.5.

The young nutria are born fully furred with their eyes open. They feed on vegetation within hours and will nurse for 7-8 weeks. The females have four pairs of mammary glands that are located on the side of the body so her young are able to nurse with their noses above the water's surface while the mother is floating. When the nutria is not floating and swimming in the water, the nutria will sometimes live in burrows and marshes, often creating flat, nest-like platforms of dead vegetation for feeding, loafing, grooming, and birthing. Depending on the environment, they may also construct burrows in levees, dikes and embankments.

These rodents are typically found in Gulf Coast states but have expanded their range toward the southeastern states, the Pacific Northwest and along the Atlantic Coast.

They can be seen eating at any time of the day, but the period of greatest feeding activity is just prior to sunrise and after sunset. Nutria are strict herbivores and consume their food both on land and in the water, where they feed themselves aquatic plants with their forepaws. Nutria consume up to 25% of their weight daily and predominately feed on the bases of plant stems and dig for roots and rhizomes in winter.

Since nutria eat plants from the stems or roots rather than just the leaves, the plant is less likely to grow, which causes major damage and upsets sensitive environments. They can kill off aquatic vegetation and cause erosion or loss of habitat for other species. This damage has affected sugarcane and rice farms, resulting in large financial losses for farmers. The nutria's burrowing can lead to erosion along rivers and roadways.

Nutria is a non-native invasive species in Oklahoma. They are found along the Red River and its tributaries in southern Oklahoma. Hunters and trappers with a valid hunting license may harvest nutria year-round statewide, and there is no daily, season or possession limit.



photo credit: XOR74/FLICKR CC BYNCSA2



PHOTO BY: WILDLIFEDEPARTMENT.COM

This time of year brings cool breezes and the excitement of the new hunting seasons. But don't forget that fishing can be mighty fine when the leaves start putting on their fall colors. Regardless of the activity, autumn always seems to entice us back to the beauty of Outdoor Oklahoma.

Outdoor Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION