

Elk

The second statewide private lands elk season was a success in 2015-16. The state was broken into seven zones and managed under a quota system. The traditional elk-hunting zone surrounding the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Oklahoma was left in place. The rest of the state was divided using Interstate 35 and I-40, and the three Panhandle counties made up another zone. Within the northwest zone was a Special Northwest Zone with unique regulations and bag limits. To see



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the quota and bag limit for each zone, see **Table 3**.

Elk seasons ran concurrently with established deer seasons, except in the Special Southwest Zone. Hunters with modern guns harvested 36 bulls and 45 cows. Archery hunters were the next highest with 24 cows and 22 bulls. Muzzleloader hunters bagged two cows and three bulls. The elk harvest of 132 on private land in 2015-16 was just one elk more than 2014-15. To see the breakdown of harvest by zone and method, check **Table 4**.

For those with access to Fort Sill, 49 elk were killed. Archery hunters harvested 10 cows and 11 bulls. Gun hunters took home 20 cows and eight bulls.

Oklahoma hunters who do not have access to private land to hunt elk can apply for a hunt through the Wildlife Department's Controlled Hunts program. The majority of the permits issued through the draw process are for the

Wichita Mountains NWR in southwestern Oklahoma. Last year surveys indicated elk numbers were on the rise, refuge staff concluded that more opportunity was available and increased the quota. This past season 155 hunters pursued elk on the refuge during two different hunts. Sixty hunters were lucky enough to draw a coveted bull tag; 53 of those hunters harvested a bull, an impressive 88 percent success rate. Cow hunters had great success as well with an overall success rate of 81 percent; 95 hunters took home 72 cow elk during the two hunts. Other controlled elk hunt opportunities were available at Pushmataha WMA and Cookson Hills WMA. Both permits were either-sex, and both hunters filled their tags with bull elk on their WMA controlled hunt.

The statewide elk limit was set at two for all elk zones combined. In total, 308 elk were taken statewide during the 2015-16 season.

Table 3: Elk Private Land Zone Quota and Bag Limit

Zone	Quota	Bag Limit
Panhandle	60	2
Northwest	8	1
Special Northwest	2	1
Northeast	20	1
Southwest	5	1
Special Southwest	None	2
Southeast	5	1

Table 4: Elk Private Land Zone Harvest by Method, 2015

Zone	Archery	Gun	Muzzleloader	Total Harvest
Panhandle	4	18	1	23
Northwest	0	1	0	1
Special Northwest	2	0	0	2
Northeast	2	3	1	6
Southwest	3	1	1	5
Special Southwest	32	58	0	90
Southeast	3	0	2	5
Total	46	81	5	132



Pronghorn

The pronghorn population in Oklahoma is slowly recovering from drought in the Panhandle, however biologists decided to keep tag allocations through the Controlled Hunts program unchanged for the 2015 season. Archery hunters had the chance to pursue pronghorn from Oct. 1-14. This year they harvested nine pronghorns (eight bucks and one doe).

Those hunters lucky enough to draw a once-in-a-lifetime permit through the Department's Controlled Hunts program harvested 24 bucks and 22 does. Landowner permits also allowed an additional 17 does to be harvested, bringing the total pronghorn harvest to 72 in 2015. This was one more than hunters took in 2014.

Data Collection And Analysis

Every year for the past several decades, students from three universities enrolled in natural resource programs are hired to collect deer jaws from hunter-killed deer across the state. This data, coupled with deer jaws collected on WMAs, deer harvested by cooperators in the Department's Deer Management Assistance Program, and from online jaw submission photos, provides herd age structure information that is needed to make sure the herd is balanced and healthy in Oklahoma.

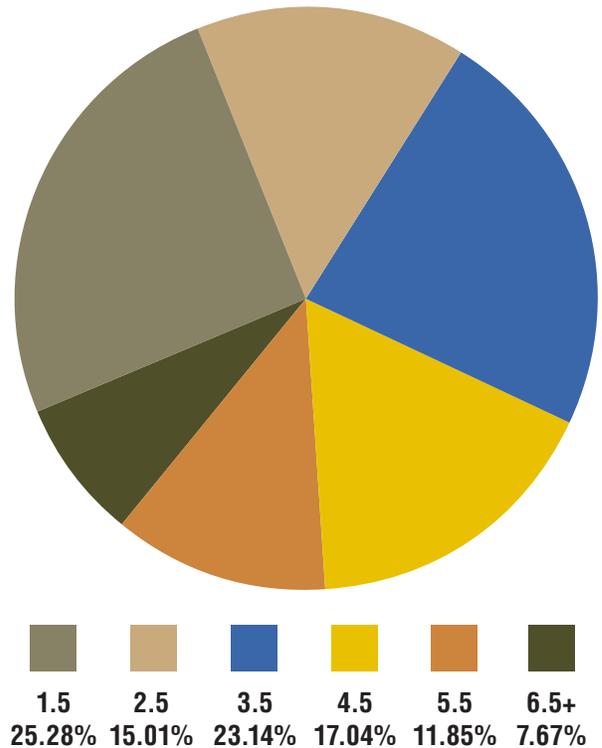
A total of 2,603 jaws were collected from hunter-harvested deer during the 2015-16 season. These jaws were then aged using the tooth wear and eruption method, to estimate age at the time of harvest. This allowed biologists to examine roughly 3 percent of the 2015-16 deer harvest. This informative data set is highlighted in **Figure 19** and **Figure 20**, showing buck and doe age structure in the harvest. The ages given in these figures are divided into half-year increments. While this might seem odd, if you remember that fawns are born in the spring, so when hunting season arrives, that deer is 6 months or a half-year old.

Yearling bucks (those that are 1.5 years old) are especially good barometers of a herd's physical condition. Their high vulnerability to harvest usually ensures a large sample size, and, more importantly, these young bucks have the burden of growing their first set of antlers when body growth is not complete. This makes them especially sensitive to prevailing range conditions. When yearlings have well-developed antlers with many points and large beam diameters, the herd can be considered healthy. In 2015, 224 yearling bucks were aged from



TOM KOERNER/USFWS

Figure 19: 2015 Adult White-tailed Buck Age Distribution



the dataset and of these 56 percent had four or more points (Figure 18). This is down slightly from the 2014-15 season and can likely be explained by the odd weather we had during the growing season with all the rainfall coming in May, then nearly no rainfall for much of the state for 120 days. This likely slowed down antler growth for these young bucks.

Figure 19 shows the 2015-16 adult buck age structure. The proportion of yearling bucks in the harvest increased slightly from 2014-15, totaling 25.3 percent of the harvest. This figure is up 1.2 percent, likely a result of another good year of reproduction and increased fawn survival, which puts more of those yearling bucks on the landscape and makes their proportion of the herd larger than it has been in previous years.

The age structure for adult does is shown in Figure 20. The doe harvest is a telling sign of our herd structure. Since does do not have antlers, the harvest pressure on does is fairly level across the board. Interestingly the yearling doe portion of the harvest is only 2 percent less than yearling buck harvest, indicating that yearling buck harvest is likely matching the proportion of animals available on the landscape.

Wildlife Management Areas

While the Wildlife Department only manages 3 percent of the state's land area, deer harvested from these managed areas accounted for 7 percent of the total harvest in

2015-16. This is why the Wildlife Department is continually looking for opportunities to increase hunter access. Some WMAs are open to hunting and have the same general statewide dates and bag limits. Some others have special regulations to help manage hunter numbers and deer populations. A few WMAs are only available to hunters fortunate enough to draw a permit through the Wildlife Department's Controlled Hunts program. In 2015-16, 6,248 deer were harvested on public lands. Of the deer taken 30 percent were does. Table 2 shows a harvest summary for each WMA by season and sex.

Conclusions

The 2015-16 seasons saw fewer hunters afield than during the previous year, resulting in a lower harvest. Massive acorn crops across much of the eastern part of the state reduced deer movement through much of the hunting season because it was easy for deer to find food. An ice storm struck Oklahoma during gun season for the third year in a row! This certainly affected participation and harvest during the busiest hunting season in Oklahoma.

Hunters more and more are embracing their role as deer managers. The liberal hunting opportunities in Oklahoma allow hunters the flexibility to manage as they see fit at their favorite hunting spot. By letting young bucks walk, hunters can see the potential that Oklahoma has to offer for quality bucks. And by harvesting does, they can help balance the herd with available habitat.

We are looking forward to the 2016-17 deer seasons, and we hope you are, too. 🌿

Figure 20: 2015 Adult Doe Age Distribution

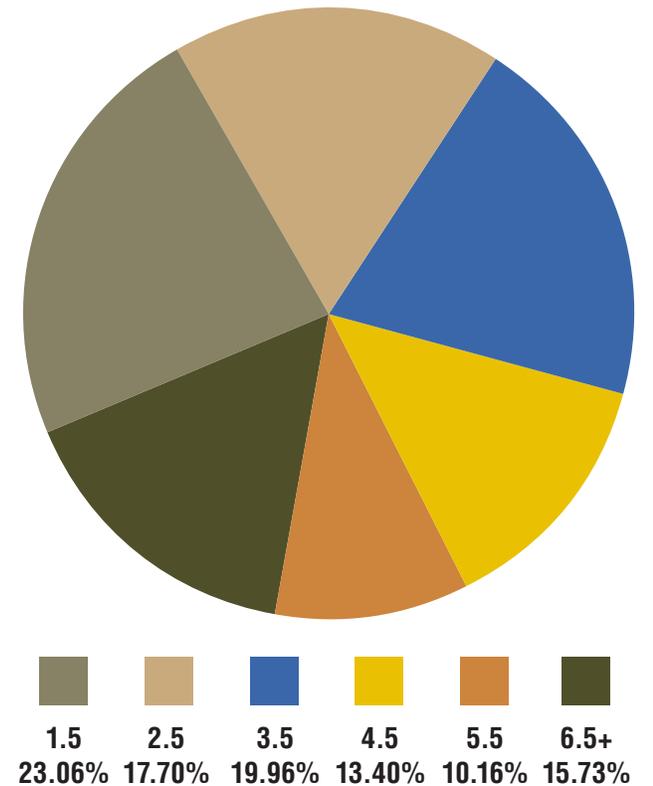
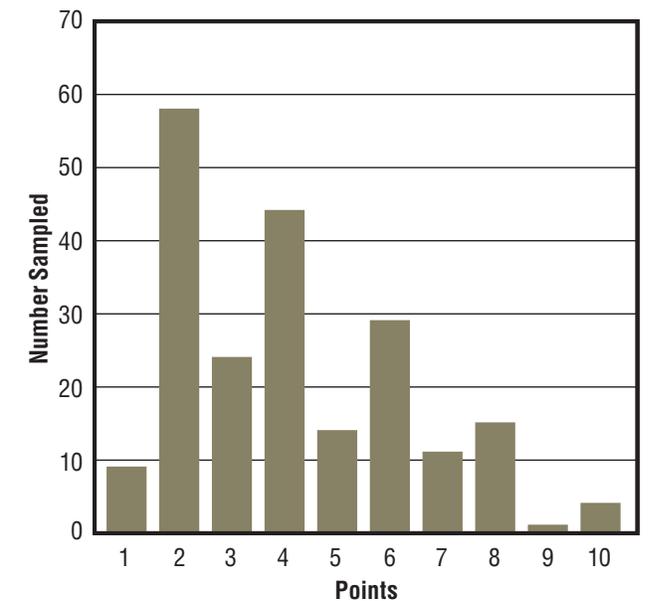


Figure 18: Yearling Buck Antler Point Distribution, 2015



Bear Harvest Totals 52 for 2015 Seasons

By Jeff Ford, Wildlife Biologist



Oklahoma hunters took 52 black bears in all during the 2015 hunting seasons.

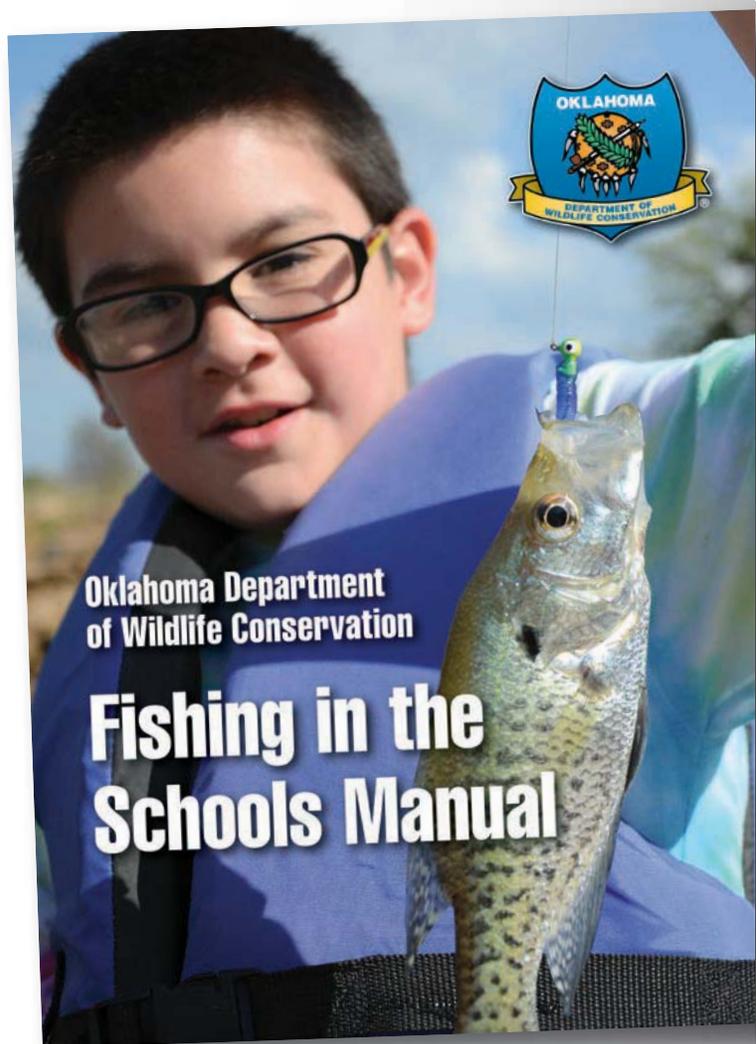
Bear hunting has been permitted since 2009 in only four counties in southeastern Oklahoma: Le Flore, Latimer, Pushmataha and McCurtain. Hunters can choose archery or muzzleloader seasons, and there is a one bear combined season limit per hunter. A quota of 20 bears is set for the muzzleloader season, but the actual harvest the past few years has not come close to that number.

Le Flore County produced the most bear hunter success this past year, yielding 39 bears to hunters. Only two of Le Flore County's bears were taken by muzzleloader hunters. Latimer County yielded only one bear for the year. Usually about three-fourths of the total bear harvest each year occurs on private land.

In all, 49 bears (27 males and 22 females) were harvested during the archery season, and three bears (two males and one female) were taken with muzzleloaders.

Hunters wanting to pursue black bear in 2016 must buy either an archery or muzzleloader bear license before the opening dates of each season. Archery bear season will be Oct. 1-16. Muzzleloader bear season will be Oct. 22-30, but the season will close as soon as the quota of 20 bears has been reached. Muzzleloader hunters must check the bear quota status on the day of their hunt by calling (888) 901-3256. For more information, consult the Oklahoma Hunting & Fishing Regulations Guide. 🐾

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In 2010, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation started training educators to introduce the Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools Program into their classrooms. Now, more than 250 schools across that state are incorporating this curriculum into the classroom, often with some of our other Outdoor Education programs: Oklahoma National Archery in the Schools Program, Explore Bowhunting, Explore Bowfishing, Oklahoma Scholastic Shooting Sports Program and Hunter Education. The material on the following eight pages is additional information that will be added to the Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools manual. Information about the Aquatic Nuisance Species Program and streams management will be included to help better inform students on the aquatic resources in Oklahoma. For more information on the Oklahoma Fishing in the Schools Program, click the "Education" link at wildlifedepartment.com.