

Special hunt permits: Luck of the draw or not?

By JIM HUCKABAY Contributing Columnist
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Drawing a special big game hunt permit isn't quite as simple and straightforward as it seems — or as a good many of us think it ought to be. How is it that homies with well over a dozen preference points in each year's permit drawing seem to have diminishing odds rather than increasing odds of being drawn? The weighted draw system is honest, but it appears that we complicate it ourselves. How? Come to the Hal Holmes Center on April 9 — the monthly meeting of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club — and find out why the system fails some of us and what we might be able to do about it as we move ahead.

Times have changed. While a hunter can still purchase an over-the-counter general big game license in most states, there will be some sort of lottery for high-demand hunting permits. The pros operating those lotteries are working to make or keep their systems fair and honest. Yes, in some states, there will be leftover licenses after the draw. (For example, we still buy "leftover after the draw" licenses for our annual Wyoming deer and antelope safaris. And decades ago in Colorado, after the draw, we would line up outside the Division of Wildlife gate the night before leftover licenses were handed out on a "first come-first served" basis.) Today, such opportunities are ever fewer and farther between. Alas, in Washington, as in most states, there are no leftover permits — just too many applicants.

This is a sacred thing. During the weeks before late May, a good many of us who hunt begin seriously weighing possibilities. We think about hunting some critter we have long dreamed of pursuing, in some season or place we have long dreamed of hunting. Getting a license for one of these “dream” hunts is like winning the lottery, and chasing those almost impossible permits can drag across decades. We chuckle through the frustration and ask each other questions like “So, what are the odds this year?”

Here's the process. In April, the Washington Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations booklet shows up online and at license outlets. In it are the dates and conditions under which we can purchase a license for big game in one of the “general” seasons. In that same booklet, however, are nearly one thousand “special” hunts — those areas with limited access (by age or ability or training or...) and limited numbers of deer, elk, sheep, or so on. On the row for each special hunt in the booklet will be a) the number of permits available this year, b) the number of applications for those permits last year and c) the average number of “preference” points used by last year's successful applicants.

(One gets an additional preference point for each year one is not drawn — a sort of additional “ticket” in the drawing for each point — thus, a “weighted draw” system.)

One purchases an application, for the specific hunt(s) chosen from the many hundreds mentioned above, and submits it online by late May — a date set by the State Wildlife Commission. Once each application is submitted, with preference points, one may offer a series of prayers, or perform a traditional ritual, and wait. The drawing results are released by the end of June. A similar scenario plays out, pretty much, across the US.

We are optimists, and this is sacred stuff. Most of us already know that 2018 is the year we have enough points to finally have a great adventure hunting moose, or bighorn sheep or a big bull elk. This is in spite of rather long odds. Let me give you a couple examples; I now have 17 preference points for moose, and last year more than 14,000

hopefuls applied for 20-some permits; my 15 points for a bighorn permit are iffy, given last year's 5,000-plus applications for the four permits in my dream area. We live with long odds, and cling to the notion that NOT being drawn for a treasured hunt simply means that our number will come up next year.

Reality is a stern master, however. Washington Fish and Wildlife pros are working very hard to keep our weighted (preference point) draw system fair. While an applicant with many points has better odds of being drawn than one with less points, the simple fact is that in many of the draws fewer of the available permits are drawn by those of us with a large number of points than by those with only a few points. The system is legit, but it suffers increasingly from its popularity.

It is a complicated issue. If you want to better understand "the draw," your odds, and how it all fits together, be at the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club presentation at 7 p.m. April 9 at the Hal Holmes Center. That evening will also be a first step in putting together the public conversations needed to find solutions to a system suffering from the weight of its huge number of users. Your thinking could help find fixes along the path ahead.

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