

## **An elusive critter Weather blamed for poor hunting conditions**

PATRICK CARLSON

Nov 17, 2006

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As 2006 big-game hunting seasons for modern firearms wrap up, it's still unclear how much success hunters saw this fall.

Relatively mild weather may have made it difficult for hunters stalking some of the thousands of elk that call Kittitas and Yakima counties home, according to Ted Clausing, a wildlife program manager in Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Region 3. More severe weather forces the elk to move, and he said the weather may not have done much to help hunters this year.

"When the elk are moving, they're more vulnerable," Clausing said. "Snow is really what makes them more visible."

The WDFW doesn't have any hard numbers yet, so it's still unclear how many deer and elk have been harvested during the 2006 hunting season. In 2005, about 30,000 licensed elk hunters in Yakima and Kittitas counties had a 9 percent success rate, according to Clausing. The 16,000 deer hunters saw a 14 percent success rate. Deer and elk hunters are limited to one kill per calendar year.

Local hunter Gordon Blossom said one thing stood out for him this season.

"I saw a lot less deer this year than in other years," he said Wednesday.

Blossom had just returned from Spokane, where he bagged a white-tailed deer. It was one of about 20 hunting excursions the 90-year-old hunter has made this year. He's not sure if he's just been in the wrong places, but after more than 30 years of hunting locally, he saw fewer deer than ever before.

But that didn't bother him, he said. After 78 years as a hunter, he doesn't care if he comes home empty handed.

"I just love to be out," Blossom said.

Jim Huckabay, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, said that from what he's heard, there have probably been fewer successful hunters this year compared to other years. He blamed it on the weather not forcing deer to move to lower elevations.

"You need a little weather to move the deer down," Huckabay said. "(But) everybody reported seeing a lot of elk."

About one-third of the state's elk live in south-central Washington, according to Clausing. It's been a traditional elk hunting area for many years, and hunter harvest reports tell the WDFD a lot about the health and size of the local herds, he said.

"That's really the best sample we've got," Clausing said.

Hunters who bag deer, elk, black bear or turkey are required to report their kills before Jan. 31, 2007. If they do not, they receive a \$10 fine, which must be paid before a 2007 hunting license can be purchased.

In the past, the WDFD had gathered information through voluntary mail surveys, highway checking stations as well as reports from hunters directly in the field. But this wasn't enough, and only about 40 percent of successful hunters would end up reporting their harvest, according to the WDFD.

This left wildlife biologists short of information on the health of animal populations, and in April reports became mandatory for all license holders, whether they hunted or not, according to WDFD.

Harvests can be reported over the phone at (877) 945-3492 or on the Internet at <https://fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov>.