

The Basics of Elk Hunting in Washington



Photo by Todd Nyquist



**Washington Department
of Fish and Wildlife**
Wildlife Program
Hunter Education Division
April 2019

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The information contained in this manual was collected from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website (wdfw.wa.gov) and its employees unless otherwise cited. (2016)

Introduction

Welcome to elk hunting! This course should provide you with basic knowledge about elk hunting in Washington State and give you a general guide to be successful. It should also serve to help you in your hunting pursuits.

In our Basic Hunter Education course, we teach students how to hunt safely. This course is designed to give you an overview of the biology and habits of Washington's elk species and how to hunt them effectively. This guide will also help teach you about game handling, hunting equipment regulations and choices, correct shot placement, hunter reporting, and much more. These topics will help you become more knowledgeable as a hunter and make the animals you harvest become great table fare.

One thing to remember when pursuing any animal is that it is called hunting for a reason. You may not be successful in harvesting an animal every day, or every season. That's part of the enduring challenge and fun of hunting. Each season brings a new opportunity to hone your skills. To properly set your expectations, check the annual harvest statistics, which are posted on the WDFW website at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/management/game-harvest>.

For most of us, hunting is about much more than a successful harvest. It's about spending time afield bonding with family and friends, watching the sunrise over the mountains on a crisp fall morning, and having exciting stories to tell when you get home.



Photos by WDFW

License and Tag Choices

WDFW offers many different licenses that allow you to elk in Washington. Unlike many other states, Washington offers species-specific big game licenses that include a transport tag in the cost of the license. This system allows you the flexibility to buy each species option individually, or receive discounts if you buy a bundled multi-species package (see below for an example of big game license packages). You can also receive a discount if you purchase your small game license and a big game license together. Remember that you will not receive the discount unless the license items are purchased at the same time.

The licenses listed below are available for purchase by any hunter over-the-counter and give you the ability to hunt during the general hunting season.

The general season big game license choices are as follows:

- Deer, Elk, Bear, and Cougar License
- Deer, Elk, Bear, and Cougar License W/discounted Small game
- Deer and Elk License
- Deer and Elk License W/discounted Small game license
- Deer License
- Deer License W/discounted Small game license
- Elk License
- Elk License W/discounted Small game license
- Bear License
- Bear License W/discounted Small game license
- Cougar License
- Cougar License W/discounted Small game license

Big game licenses are issued based on species option, but transport tags are more specific. For elk, you must declare a weapon type (archery, muzzleloader, or modern firearm) and area (eastern or western Washington) to receive your transport tag. If you haven't decided on a weapon type or area when you buy your license(s), you can choose to have your tag printed later, but make sure you get your tag before you hunt.

Elk can be hunted with archery, muzzleloader, or modern firearm hunting equipment. The hunting seasons for elk are broken down by equipment and area choices. Making hunters choose their equipment and area helps prevent overcrowding during the hunting season. WDFW sets the season length based on harvest rates and seasonal animal surplus projections.

A hunter who chooses archery can only use archery equipment during the archery season. Muzzleloader season tag holders can use archery or muzzleloader equipment during muzzleloader season. Those hunters who choose modern firearm can use archery, muzzleloader, or modern firearm equipment during the modern firearm season. Remember that you may only hunt in the season that matches your tag.

Elk Species

Washington State is home to two sub-species of elk. Rocky Mountain elk occur east of the Cascade Crest, while Roosevelt elk are located on the Olympic Peninsula. Hybrids, or genetically mixed populations of Roosevelt elk and Rocky Mountain elk, are common in the Cascade Range. Rocky Mountain elk are slightly lighter in color and generally smaller than Roosevelt elk. The antlers of Rocky Mountain elk are typically more slender, have longer tines, and are less palmated than Roosevelt elk antlers.

Elk are hardy animals that have few physiological needs for cover. They do, however, use cover during extreme weather, to avoid hunters, or when they are harassed. Cover also conceals newborn calves from predators. Ideal elk habitat includes productive grasslands, meadows, or clearcuts, interspersed with closed-canopy forests. Year-round ranges for Rocky Mountain elk vary from 2,500 to 10,000 acres, and usually include distinct summering and wintering areas. Year-round ranges for Roosevelt elk are smaller, usually 1,500 to 4,000 acres, because they are generally found where the climate is less severe and where food and cover are more readily available.



Photo by Ginger Holser

Roosevelt Elk

Roosevelt elk, named after U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, occur in the Coast Range, the Olympic Range, and other areas west of Interstate 5. Olympic National Park in northwest Washington holds the largest number of Roosevelt elk living anywhere (about 5,000). True Roosevelt elk occur in the Olympic Mountains region. All other elk in western Washington are a genetic mixture of Roosevelt and Rocky mountain elk.

- Species Description
 - Bodies are light brown to tan except the rump area, which is a beige or white color. Legs and necks are generally a dark brown to black.
 - Bulls have antlers, cows do not.
 - Bulls weigh between 700 and 1,100 pounds and stand about five feet tall at the shoulder
 - Cows weigh between 575 and 625 pounds and stand about four and a half feet at the shoulder.
 - Largest bodied elk in USA.
 - Antlers have points that extend off of a vertical main beam and can develop a distinctive crown or three-point tip.

Hunting techniques

When going to a new area, hunters will do best to cover as much ground as possible. Note areas where you see sign along roads and landings. Often times, landings are not graveled, making it easy to see fresh tracks. Scouting will reveal what areas hold elk and where to focus more intensive scouting and hunting efforts.

After identifying areas with abundant elk sign, hunters should focus on stands that provide cover and are adjacent to clearcuts. Hunting pressure can also force elk to use areas that provide thicker cover or are more inaccessible to hunters because of topography. Later in the season, consult a topographic map and find “benches” located in steep terrain with thick cover. Elk often use these benches to bed down during the day.

Finally, don’t let a locked gate (provided that non-motorized access is allowed) keep you from going into an area to search for elk. Frequently, these areas hold elk that have not received much hunting pressure, making them less skittish and easier to hunt.

Rocky Mountain Elk

Rocky Mountain elk occur primarily in the mountain ranges and shrublands east of the Cascades Crest. Small herds have been established, or reestablished, throughout other parts of western Washington. Rocky Mountain elk populations currently in Washington stem from elk transplanted from Yellowstone National Park in the early 1900s.



Photo by WDFW

- Species description
 - Bodies are light tan except the rump area, which is a beige color. Legs and necks are generally darker than the body
 - Bulls have antlers, cows do not.
 - Bulls weigh about 700 pounds and stand about five feet tall at the shoulder
 - Cows weigh about 500 pounds and stand about four and a half feet at the shoulder.
 - Largest antlers of elk in USA.

Hunting Techniques

Rocky Mountain elk inhabit the sprawling forests and grasslands of eastern Washington. They can be located by getting on a high ridge and glassing for the herd. Being at that glassing location at first light will allow for more hunting time and a better chance to locate the herd because they typically feed right at daybreak. Once located, note what they are doing and start hiking. Upon getting into the general area that the elk were spotted, you can determine which of the general elk hunting techniques you would like to employ.

Once the hunting season starts, these elk have a lot of hunting pressure due to the ease of seeing them at long distances. When they are pressured, they will generally move to more remote locations. To be successful, you may have to leave the roads behind and hike into the backcountry. Always know how you are going to transport the elk back to your vehicle.

General Elk Information

Food and Feeding Habits

Elk require large amounts of food because of their body size and herding tendencies. In spring and summer, when food is plentiful, elk are mainly grazers, eating grasses, sedges, and a variety of flowering plants. In fall, elk increasingly become browsers, feeding on sprouts and branches of shrubs and trees, including conifers as a last resort when snow covers other plants. During fall and winter, elk continue to eat grasses when they are available.

Like deer and moose, elk are ruminants. They initially chew their food just enough to swallow it. This food is stored in a stomach called the “rumen.” From there, the food is regurgitated and re-chewed before being swallowed again, entering a second stomach where digestion begins. It passes into third and fourth stomachs before finally entering the intestine.

Look for broken shoots on browse plants. If these broken shoots are four feet or higher off the ground, it’s likely elk browsing and not deer. This may mean that elk are using this area as a feeding area. If you have a good vantage point, this may be a spot to try during the season. See the table to the right for species specific food usage information.

Food plants used by Washington Elk	
Roosevelt Elk	Rocky Mountain Elk
Trees	
Aspen	Aspen
Cottonwood	Chokecherry
Red alder	Cottonwood
Vine maple	Rocky mountain maple
Willow	Willow
Shrubs and Groundcover	
Blackberry	Bitterbrush
Huckleberry	Currant
Oregon-grape	Deer brush
Salal	Elderberry
Salmonberry	Huckleberry
Thimbleberry	Oceanspray
Wild rose	Red-twig dogwood
	Serviceberry
	Snowberry
	Sumac
	Wild rose
Forbs, Ferns, and Legumes	
Bear grass	Alfalfa
Cat's ear	Clover
Clover	Dandelion
Cow-parsnip	Fireweed
Fireweed	Sweet clover
Foamflower	Yellow salsify
Oregon oxalis	
Pearly everlasting	
Sword fern	



Photo by WDFW

Tracks

Elk have cloven hooves that normally resemble a split-heart shape on soft earth. An elk track is about four inches long and three inches wide and larger and more round than a deer track. It is also somewhat rounder and smaller than a moose track. The dewclaws on all four feet may register in several inches of mud or snow. Hoof prints may be splayed wide on slippery surfaces, or when the animals were running.

Elk trails are often several animals wide and quite noticeable at the transition from grassland into brush or woodlands.



Elk are much easier to track than most animals due to their weight. They generally leave tracks in or on almost anything they walk over. Tracks are often found in large numbers, indicating a passing herd, and can be easy to follow.

Droppings

Elk droppings may be the same general shape and texture of deer droppings. Individual pellets are usually dimpled at one end and have a small projection at the other, giving them an almost acorn-like shape. However, elk droppings are slightly larger, and whereas an adult deer may leave 20 to 30 pellets at a time, elk may deposit twice that many. This difference in volume becomes especially apparent when a rich diet causes the animals' droppings to become a soft mass, similar to a domestic cowpie, but smaller.



Photo by WDFW

Wallow Sites

Probably the most easily identified elk sign is the mud wallow scented with urine and droppings. Bull elk roll in wallows to cover their bodies with scent, creating bathtub-size depressions with low walls of displaced mud ringing their perimeters. Receptive cow elk, drawn by the odor, will also roll and urinate in the wallow, indicating their willingness to mate. Elk that use these wallows may become so foul smelling that, when downwind, humans can easily detect their presence.

Elk also roll in mud wallows to loosen their dead winter coats and help dislodge annoying parasites. A coating of mud also provides some degree of protection from bloodsucking insects.

Mud wallows are musky smelling and if actively being used, will have fresh hoofprints all around. Wallows are found where the ground is wet and muddy, usually near water and almost

always in a secluded area where elk feel relaxed enough to drop their guard. Abandoned wallows will likely be filled with water, have grasses growing around them, and may develop into breeding sites for frogs and salamanders.

Bedding areas

An area of flattened vegetation three to four feet long and two to three feet wide indicates where an elk has bedded down. Elk sleep in dense cover or tall grasses and may return to the same spot over many days. Since elk often travel in small groups, there may be several “elk beds” in the same vicinity. During winter, similarly sized depressions in the snow, often littered with old hairs, characterize bed-sites. If you know about these sites, it can be effective to set up near the site and watch for elk coming back to bed down at dusk or getting up in the morning. The elk can also bed for a mid-day nap.



Photo by Jimmy Montgomery

Rubs

As antler growth ceases in late summer and antlers finish mineralizing, the blood supply to the velvet begins to deteriorate. This causes the velvet covering of the antlers to dry up and shred. As it dies, bulls begin to vigorously rub their antlers on shrubs and trees, to help rid them of the velvet. This rubbing behavior may also be the first ritualized use of the bull’s newly hardened antlers. It can be quite noisy and attract the attention of other elk.

The rubbing also covers the bone-white antler with plant compounds that subsequently oxidize and stain the antlers to their characteristic dark brown color. Antler color can also be influenced by blood and how long the bull stays in the open country where antlers are exposed to the sunlight.

Regardless of the cause of this behavior, the result is obvious. Small saplings and shrubs are left looking like someone with a hedge trimmer went on an angry rampage. In areas where elk are abundant, mangled foliage is an extremely obvious sign of the presence of bulls. These rubs occur before the rut begins and the bulls that made them may be miles away from them, but it is an indication that the area has been used by elk.

General Elk Hunting Techniques

There are three basic hunting techniques used in elk hunting: spot and stalk, stand hunting, and still hunting.

Spot and stalk hunting is by far the most used hunting method by elk hunters. This technique is where a hunter surveys areas likely to be used by elk, usually aided by binoculars or a spotting

scope. Once a legal elk is spotted, the hunter then sneaks to within range of the elk in hopes of getting a shot. Spot and stalk is commonly used in more open habitats where elk can be spotted at a distance. It can also be used when animals have been observed by a hunter and the hunter has not been detected.

Stand hunting is best described as waiting in ambush, where a hunter positions themselves at a place along a trail, feeding site, or other elk use area and waits for a shot to present itself. Ground blinds or tree stands are commonly employed in stand hunting, although many stand hunters simply lean against a tree or sit on a stump near a likely area or travel corridor. This type of hunting should only be used when you know animals are close and using the area. Elk are more apt to move longer distances and use bigger areas than deer. If there is water present and elk sign, this would be a good place to set up a stand or blind and hunt the water hole.

Still hunting requires the hunter to move very slowly and quietly through elk habitat in hopes of seeing a legal elk before it reacts to the hunter's presence. Although all forms of elk hunting are challenging, still hunting is perhaps the most challenging. Successful still hunters move at a snail's pace, taking three or four steps at a time, before stopping to look and listen. It is important that the hunter move into or across any prevailing wind so as not to be smelled by an elk.

Hunting Equipment

Legal hunting equipment is as diverse as the companies that create and sell them. There are huge books that have been written about all the different types of firearms and archery equipment and what their uses are. Since we only have limited space and time, the regulations behind the hunting equipment will be discussed below. There are also suggestions on different calibers and projectiles for each species.

Below are some suggestions and information on the different hunting equipment that you may need when hunting in Washington. These are just suggestions and you will need to find what works for you. This section details legal equipment at the time of the writing of this booklet.

Archery equipment

Archery equipment consists of many types of bows that are commercially available today. All of these bows have to meet the following criteria to be used to hunt big game in Washington State.

- Mechanical broadheads are legal to use for all archery hunting.
- It is unlawful for any person to carry or have in his possession any firearm while in the field archery hunting, during an archery season specified for that area, except for modern handguns carried for personal protection.
- Modern handguns cannot be used to hunt big game or dispatch wounded big game during an archery, big game hunting season.

- It is unlawful to have any electrical equipment or electric device(s) **except for illuminated nocks**, attached to the bow or arrow while hunting.
- It is unlawful to shoot a bow and arrow from a vehicle or from, across or along the maintained portion of a public highway.
- It is unlawful to use any device secured to or supported by the bow for the purpose of maintaining the bow at full draw or in a firing position.
- It is unlawful to hunt big game animals with any arrow or bolt that does not have a sharp broadhead, and the broadhead blade or blades are less than seven eighths inch wide.
- It is unlawful to hunt wildlife with any bow equipped with a scope.
- Rules pertaining to long bow, recurve bow, and compound bow archery:
 - It is unlawful for any person to hunt big game animals with a bow that does not produce a minimum of 40 pounds of pull measured at twenty-eight inches or less draw length.
 - It is unlawful to hunt big game animals with any arrow measuring less than 20 inches in length or weighing less than 6 grains per pound of draw weight with a minimum arrow weight of 300 grains.



Photo by Jack Fowler

Bows can generally be placed in one of two categories, compound or traditional. Compound bows are the most popular hunting bow because of their ease of use. The mechanics of the bow allow for the shooter to more easily draw and hold than the traditional bows. The compounds have what is called let off. At a certain point in the draw, the draw weight is reduced by as much as 85%. These bows are always strung and ready to go.

Traditional bows are either Long Bows or Recurve Bows. There is no mechanical let off when holding these bows at full draw. However, these bows are just as effective at harvesting animals as compound bows (if you are proficient with them). These bows have to be strung before use because if you kept the bow strung it would lose power by forming to the strung position.

There are several types of arrows available for hunters, generally constructed of wood, aluminum, or carbon fiber. Refer to the manufacturers table to determine which arrow type and size fit your bow and shooting conditions best. If you are unsure of the arrows to purchase, consult with an archery retailer.

Broadheads need to be used when hunting big game with archery equipment. These also come in many different shapes and sizes. Make sure the broadhead you are purchasing and using is at least 7/8" in diameter. You may want to purchase the same weight broadhead as the field points you are using for target practice to minimize sight adjustment in your bow.

Crossbows can be used in archery season IF you are a disabled hunter and have been approved for a special use permit through WDFW's ADA program. Please see the crossbow information within the Modern Firearm Equipment section since it is considered a modern firearm in regards to hunting in Washington.

Muzzleloader equipment

As with archery equipment, muzzleloaders come in all makes and models. No matter who manufactures the muzzleloader, it has to meet the following criteria to be legal to hunt big game in Washington State:

- Muzzleloader: A firearm that is loaded from the muzzle and uses black powder or a black powder substitute as recommended by the manufacturer for use in all muzzleloading firearms.
- A muzzleloading firearm shall be considered loaded if a powder charge and a projectile, either shot or single projectile are in the barrel and the barrel or breech is capped or primed.
- It is unlawful to hunt wildlife using a muzzleloading firearm that does not meet the following specifications:
 - A muzzleloading shotgun or rifle must have a single or double barrel, rifled or smooth-bored.
 - A muzzleloading shotgun or rifle used for elk must be .40 caliber or larger. Buckshot size #1 or larger may be used in a smoothbore of .60 caliber or larger for elk.
 - A muzzleloading shotgun, rifle, or handgun used for all other big game must be .45 caliber or larger.
 - Persons lawfully hunting small game with a double barrel, muzzleloading shotgun may keep both barrels loaded.
 - A muzzleloading handgun must have a single or double barrel of at least eight inches, must be rifled, and must be capable of being loaded with forty-five grains or more of black powder or black powder substitute per the manufacturer's recommendations.
 - A muzzleloading handgun used for big game must be .45 caliber or larger.
 - A handgun designed to be used with black powder, including black powder percussion revolvers, can be used to hunt forest grouse, cottontail rabbits, and snowshoe hares.
- In addition to the above requirements, it is unlawful to participate (hunt) in a muzzleloading hunting season using a firearm that does not meet the following specifications for a muzzleloader. As in the past, sabots are allowed. Any type of projectile is allowed.

- Ignition is to be wheel lock, matchlock, flintlock, or percussion. Primers designed to be used in modern cartridges are legal.
- Sights must be open, peep, or of other open sight design. Fiber optic sights are legal. Telescopic sights or sights containing glass are prohibited.
- It is unlawful to have any electrical device or equipment attached to a muzzleloading firearm while hunting.
- Those persons lawfully hunting big game with a double barrel muzzleloader may only keep one barrel loaded.
- Muzzleloading firearms used during a modern firearm season are not required to meet ignition, sight, or double barrel restrictions.

Muzzleloaders are a great way to hunt with a method that has been around for hundreds of years with the ability to shoot to distances of 100 yards or more. This equipment type is the least utilized by hunters in Washington State, but it may be because they are unaware of how accurate and fun muzzleloader hunting can be. The good news, if you choose to become a muzzleloader hunter, is that this means the woods are not nearly as crowded as they are for archery and modern firearm elk seasons.

Currently any projectile fired from a muzzleloader is legal as long as it meets the caliber restrictions mentioned above. This is good news because of the advancements in projectiles can help with accuracy and lethality. You should explore the new options and determine the right combination for you and your rifle. Also, if you are shooting a smooth barreled muzzleloader, you can shoot buckshot as long as the muzzleloader is .60 caliber or larger.



Photo by Krista Magnussen

With muzzleloaders, make sure you use a black powder or black powder substitute that is rated for your muzzleloader. If you use the incorrect powder, it could be disastrous. Some other helpful safety hints include:

- Never fill the muzzleloader directly from the powder can flask, or powder horn, as it could spark and ignite the powder in the container.
- Mark your ramrod when the muzzleloader is empty so you can make sure it is empty upon storage.
- Be sure to seat the wad and shot directly on top of the powder charge.
- Store powder and percussion caps in separate dry and cool places.

Beware a hang fire. This happens when the trigger is pulled, the percussion cap ignites, but the firearm may not go off. Make sure to keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction for at least 30 seconds. If it still does not fire in that 30 seconds, put on another cap or re-prime the pan, and fire again. Make sure the nipple is clean on percussion locks.

Modern Firearm Equipment

Modern Firearm is the most popular elk hunting season in Washington. This may have to do with the ability of modern rifles to be able to shoot very accurately at very long distances. There are several different types of hunting equipment that are classified as modern firearm equipment. They are Rifle, Pistol, Shotgun, and Crossbow. Below are listed the regulations on the modern firearm hunting equipment by type:

Rifles

- Big game, except cougar, must be hunted with a minimum of .24 caliber (6mm) centerfire rifle. Cougar may be hunted with .22 caliber centerfire rifle. Rimfire rifles are not legal for big game.

Handguns

- Big game, except cougar, may be hunted with handguns with a minimum barrel length of 4 inches per manufacturer's specification, and fire a minimum .24 caliber centerfire cartridge. The minimum for cougar is a .22 caliber centerfire handgun. Rimfire handguns are not legal for big game.
- A modern handgun may be carried for personal protection. Modern handguns cannot be used to hunt big game (except as described above), or dispatch wounded big game during a big game hunting season for muzzleloading firearms.

Shotguns

- Deer, bear, and cougar may be hunted with 20 gauge to 10 gauge shotguns shooting slugs or #1 or larger buckshot. Other big game may be hunted with a 10 or 12 gauge shotgun using slugs.

Crossbows

- It is illegal to hunt big game with a crossbow outside of a modern firearm season. Crossbows cannot be used during an archery season.
- It is unlawful to hunt big game with a crossbow with a draw weight less than 125 pounds and a trigger safety that doesn't work properly.
- It is illegal to hunt big game with any arrow or bolt weighing less than 350 grains.
- It is illegal to hunt big game with any arrow or bolt that does not have a sharp broadhead and the broadhead blade or blades are less than seven-eighths inch wide.
- It is unlawful to discharge a crossbow from a vehicle or from, across, or along the maintained portion of a public highway.

In regards to rifles, there are so many calibers available that will work for elk hunting it can be overwhelming. Some of the most popular hunting calibers for western big game are .243, .270, 7mm mag, .308, 30-06, and .300 mag. These calibers are generally available at most sporting



Photo by Cody Pecor

goods stores since they are so popular. The rifles can fire many different bullets that have different weights and are made from different materials.

The weight of a bullet is measured in grains. The more the bullet weighs, the more energy is transferred to the target. Deer hunting generally calls for bullets that are 100-150 grains but when hunting elk, you will want to move up to the 180 grain bullet. The bullet makeup and design will cause it to act differently

when striking a target. A bullet that has a polymer tip may be designed to mushroom faster and wider than a bullet with a lead tip. Many ammunition manufacturers are producing factory ammunition loaded with all copper bullets designed for big game hunting; these bullets perform well and have gained popularity in the big game hunting fields. When hunting for big game animals, you want to use a bullet that expends its energy in the target.

While hunting with a handgun is legal, it is not as popular as other methods. If this is something that you choose to do, make sure that the bullet is effective for the job you are asking it to do. Make sure that you are taking into consideration the weight of the bullet and that it will deform enough to cause a humane hit on an animal.

Shotgun hunting for elk is generally done within firearm restriction areas. However, shotgun manufacturers do make rifled barrels for some shotguns so hunters can increase their accuracy when hunting for elk. Remember not to shoot out of a rifled barrel as it could damage the rifling. Buckshot from a smooth shotgun barrel can also be effective when harvesting elk.

Crossbows were made legal to hunt with as a modern firearm in 2015. The crossbow is gaining popularity amongst hunters because of their accuracy and speed. They are also as quiet as a bow when fired.

Clothing and Concealment

In hunting as in everything else, if you are not comfortable you won't enjoy your experiences as much as if you were comfortable. This is why how you dress is being covered in this manual. Below are some suggestions on choosing clothing, hunter orange vests/patterns, blinds, and tree stands and finding what works for you is the key.

Remember to obtain permission from the landowner prior to placing ground blinds or tree stands and if you are on public land, check the regulations of the agency that owns the land.

Boots

Hunting boots will help support your ankles and also keep your feet dry and warm. Wet and/or cold feet when hunting can make for an uncomfortable day. Some boots have insulation in them to help combat the cold. When choosing a boot, think about the kinds of hunting you will be doing and the temperatures in which you will be hunting. If you are primarily an eastern Washington hunter, you may want to get the boots with 2000 grams of insulation to help on those frigid mornings. But you also may have some hot foot issues when hunting early season in mid-October.

Layering

When dressing for any hunt, make sure to take into consideration what you may be doing. Dressing in layers will allow you to regulate your body temperature more efficiently. The idea is to wear only the layers that you need to stay warm and dry at the time, but have the option to take a layer off or put another layer on if conditions change. In cool weather, for instance, you'll probably want to wear fewer layers to hike up a steep incline, but will want to put another layer or two on once you are setup at your hunting spot and likely to be sitting for a while. A tough pair of jeans or brush pants also may be a good idea to help protect your legs when working in brush.

Camouflage

When archery or muzzleloader elk hunting, you can wear camouflage clothing to help conceal yourself. The number of camouflage patterns and manufacturers is dizzying. Just remember to try to match a pattern with the kind of habitat and climate you are going to hunt. Several of the bigger camo pattern companies have all purpose patterns that will work in a lot of different locations. These can be effective if you are unsure of where you may be hunting. If all else fails, you can use the old style of green, brown, and black camo that is common in popular culture. Remember to camouflage your face with a face covering or face paint and your hands with gloves.

The basic idea of camo clothing is to break up the outline of your silhouette and get you to blend into the habitat. Animals are instinctively afraid of humans and if they see the shape of a human, they will not stick around for you to possibly get a shot at them. Sometimes no camo is better than a contrasting camo pattern. If you are hunting the desert and are wearing camo

that is of cat tails designed for waterfowl hunting, you will stick out like a sore thumb. At that point, wear clothing that is similar in color to the surrounding country.

Also, because the weather in the Pacific Northwest is generally wet, having warm waterproof camouflage clothing can increase your comfort level and improve the experience.

Hunter Orange

Hunter orange is required to be worn by all modern firearm elk hunters during the modern firearm season. The hunter orange clothing has to be at least 400 square inches, be above the waist, and be visible. It is recommended to wear as much hunter orange as possible to help other hunters see you when in the field. To maximize your use of the hunter orange, you may just decide to purchase an upland bird vest to use for all hunting you do that requires hunter orange. Hunter orange hats are also recommended when hunting in tall cover such as tall grass or alpine forest because they are visible over the tall cover and increase the chances that other hunters will see you. However a hat by itself will not satisfy the 400 square inch requirement.

Blinds

Elk have outstanding vision, so minimizing movement and being totally concealed is the key. Ground blinds are becoming more and more popular. Commercial ground blinds are designed to pop up and provide total concealment on the ground. Just popping this blind up does not guarantee concealment, so try to place brush and cover around the blind to help conceal it. Make sure to keep the windows in the back zipped up so as to not silhouette yourself. Ground blinds should be set out in advance of your hunt, if possible, so the game become accustomed to the blind.

Blinds can also be constructed with burlap, 1 x 1's, spray-paint, and some string. Cut the 1 x 1's to about a four foot section. Drill holes in the 1 x 1's and lace the burlap to them. Spray paint the wood to be a dark color and put streaks of green, black, and tan on the burlap. You will then have your own blind that is easy to transport.

Depending on the surroundings, you may be able to fashion a very functional blind from available materials such as tree limbs, grass, cattails, or sagebrush. Be sure to "brush up" any blind with whatever natural vegetation occurs at the site you're hunting.

Where you build or place your blind may well be as important as how it looks and how well it hides you. As a general rule it's best to be situated with the wind in your face for elk. If you are not sure of the wind direction, there are wind indicators that can be purchased from sporting goods stores. One of the most used is a powder in a squeeze bottle that will create a puff of smoke and drift with the wind. Also you can use the old standby of picking up some dry grass and dropping that from about eye height and it should give you an indication of the wind direction.

Tree stands

Tree stands are gaining popularity with hunters here in the northwest. These attach to a tree to bring you up from ground level and provide a bird's eye view of the landscape. Some tree stands require you to use a ladder to place it on a tree. But some are called climbing tree stands because it allows you to climb the tree. When using a tree stand remember to ALWAYS wear and use a safety harness. Tree stand falls and accidents are becoming more and more frequent.

Knives

There are about as many knives available in today's sporting goods stores as there are people to buy them. They have many different shapes, uses, designs, and materials. One thing to keep in mind is a sharp knife is a good knife. Some knives are designed specifically for different jobs. When picking a knife, you will want to find something that works for you. It is recommended that you keep a knife sharpener on hand for touching up the blade when needed. You also may want a bone saw because it will help when field dressing an elk and cutting through the pelvis. Any knife can be used to care for your game.

Skinning knives have a deep belly in the blade to help you not cut through the hide. Some of these knives also come with a hook that is commonly referred to as a gut hook. This is designed to be used to easily cut open the chest cavity of big game animals to remove the entrails.



Photo by WDFW

Boning knives are straighter knives with a thinner blade. They are designed to cut the meat from the bone. This process is called deboning.



Photo by WDFW

Caping knives are shorter blades that are used to remove the skin from a big game animals head region. They allow for more fine detail work so a hunter can have the animal mounted.



Photo by WDFW

Bone saws are great for cutting through big game animals pelvises. This allows the lower intestines to be lifted out of the body cavity rather than having to pull it through the pelvis and into the body cavity.



Photo by WDFW

Optics

One thing that is paramount in elk hunting is quality optics. They can be a great asset in locating and harvesting your elk by allowing you to search vast stretches of habitat without having to hike. Optics will also allow you to verify the elk is legal before harvesting.

You will notice optics have a designation similar to 8 x 42. These numbers correspond to the



Photo by WDFW

construction. The first number is magnification. In the 8 x 42 example, the image is magnified 8 times. The second number is the diameter of the objective lens of the optic. In the 8 x 42 example, the objective lens is 42mm wide. The higher the objective lens, the bulkier the optics can be. However, the larger the objective lens, the clearer the image will be, due to more light entering. You may want to go into a sporting goods store and test out some of the optics before deciding on a specific size or model. Remember that hunters should not be using the rifle scope to glass areas since anywhere the scope is pointed is also where the barrel is aimed.

Calls to use

Calls are generally used when elk hunting in Washington. All elk make some noises to talk to others in the herd. The bull bugle is one of the most recognizable calls in the woods. It is generally used to locate bull elk. The call is a challenge to other bulls in the area.

Another call that is used frequently is the cow call. This call is generally used to bring bulls into range once they have been located. It is also effective in calming a herd down if they are starting to get spooked by your presence. It may make them think that you are just another elk.

Calf calls are similar to cow calls but higher pitched. These can be used as locator calls for cows. Make sure not to make too quick a cow call because the “bark” of an elk is a sign that danger is close and will put them on alert.

All of the below calls need air to make the call work. The push call has its own air pocket and moves air when pressed. The other three need you to create the air movement to make the call function.



Photo by WDFW

Push Call – These calls are used by pushing a plunger or air sack to give the required air movement over the reed. They are great at making cow calls and calf calls. The push call is great for beginners because the call makes the correct sound when the plunger is depressed.

Diaphragm call - This is the most difficult of the calls to master. Since all you are using is your mouth to make the call function, it can be very frustrating to learn. This method frees your hands up to do other things while calling, such as aiming at a rutting bull. This call requires a lot of practice to become proficient. One trick to practicing is keeping the call in your car so you can practice anytime you are driving.



Photo by WDFW

Bugle Tube – This call mimics a bugling bull and is a great call to use when trying to locate the herd. Generally, a bull will respond to the call if he feels like you might try to take his cows. This call can come with or without a diaphragm reed to make the calls. If it comes without a diaphragm reed you will want to get one from the store.

Cow call – This call is mouth operated to mimic cow calls. These generally have a reed similar to a duck call and are used by putting your mouth over the reed and blowing gently.



Photo by WDFW

Where to Go

Finding hunting access on private lands in Washington State is becoming more of a challenge. However, there are still a number of options available to hunters on public land. WDFW’s wildlife areas are good places to start. WDFW also has a lot of private landowners who have signed up to allow public hunting access on their lands. These lands can be found on the WDFW Hunting Access webpage <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/locations> as well as a booklet on how to find hunting access.

The “Hunting Regulations Webmap” provides users with a different way to review the Hunting Regulations. Users can explore regulations data by either selecting criteria for a search or clicking on the map to find out what hunts are available for their selected Hunt Type. In addition, it has the capabilities to look at public/private ownership, show private lands hunting opportunities, map water access sites, and display satellite imagery. The data shown in this webmap are an extension of the printed PDF pamphlet and not an authoritative source of WDFW hunting regulations. This tool is also available for use on smart phones. It can be found online at <https://geodataservices.wdfw.wa.gov/huntregs/>.

If hunters want to gain access to private property, they should scout their desired area and locate lands they might want to hunt. Once a hunter has located properties to hunt, he or she can knock on the door of the landowner. If the hunter can't locate a house, landowner contact information can be obtained from the county tax assessor office. Landowners may refuse to grant permission. If they do refuse access, make sure to thank them for their time. Hunters who are persistent in their search will most likely gain access to some lightly hunted areas and make new friends along the way. Other options include hunt clubs and hiring a guide who has access to private farms and ranches.

The department's website contains annual hunting prospects that detail WDFW biologist's expectations for hunting for the current year's seasons. These prospects are broken into 17 districts that mark where a particular biologist is responsible. Hunters can find the hunting prospects online at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/locations>.

Hunting Ethics

All hunters should be hunting ethically. There are many interpretations on ethics and what they mean, but before starting your hunt, think of what you believe is ethical and put it against what the public as a whole may think is ethical. Being ethical hunters will improve public perceptions of hunting and will benefit the sport. WDFW encourages you to raise your ethical bar to the highest level.

Some things that are considered un-ethical in regards to hunting are:

- Shooting at birds when they are outside your hunting equipment's effective range.
- Shooting birds while on the land, water, or foliage
- Hogging all of the shots from your hunting party
- Shooting a deer or elk at 1000 yards
- Using a bow or firearm that is not properly sighted in

Shot placement

Shot placement is crucial when trying to harvest an animal. As ethical sportsmen and women, we should strive to only take good shots and make the most humane kill. This can be achieved by only shooting when you are 100% confident in the shot. Part of being confident is practicing with your hunting equipment before the hunt. Another way to be confident would be to know exactly where to put the shot. Also be sure to note if there are any obstructions between you

and the elk when shooting. A branch or twig can significantly impact a projectile's trajectory. Below are the shots that may present themselves when you are in the field. The dots on the pictures show where the shot will be most effective. When taking the following shots from a tree stand remember to aim slightly higher on the animal than indicated due to the angle that the projectile will take.



Photo by Doug Steffins

Broadside

This is by far the best shot that you can have. Since the vital organs are easier to hit with this shot, most inexperienced hunters should wait until this shot presents itself. The projectile will most likely go through both lungs and possibly the heart when taking this shot.

Quartering away

This shot is also fairly effective for harvesting, but can be a challenge for some hunters. The object of this shot is to hit the tail end of the lung that is towards you and the middle or front of the lung that is away from you. Aim about four ribs in from the tail of the animal.



Photo by Craig Lemon



Quartering to

This shot is getting more difficult because there are more bone areas that can be hit. Archers probably should not take this shot as the probability of hitting a rib or shoulder is increased. Also the animal may see you draw and release and "jump the string." This refers to when the animal moves when the bowstring is released and can change the point of impact of your arrow. Muzzleloader and rifle hunters may not have an issue since the bullet should go through bone.

Photo by Bob Smithing

Head on

This shot shouldn't generally be taken. The chance of hitting vital organs is considerably less than the above three shots. The only really viable shot would be a heart shot. However, a shot from this angle would also most likely rupture the intestines, stomachs, and other areas of the elk that have digestive juices or worse. Archers should not take the shot because the sternum will most likely deflect the arrow.



Photo by Eric Johnson



Rear end

This shot shouldn't be taken. The chance of hitting vital organs is considerably less than broadside, quartering to, and quartering away shots. A shot from this angle would also most likely rupture the intestines, stomachs, and other areas of the elk that have digestive juices or worse.

Photo by Don Stout

Tracking

Tracking is one of the most difficult skills to learn. However, it is necessary to be successful in retrieving big game animals. At some point, every big game hunter will hit an animal well, only to have it run off into the brush out of sight. You will have to be able to follow a blood trail to find your big game animal. Give the animal about 30 minutes after the shot to lie down and expire. Watch and listen for any indications the animal may be down.

Go to the spot where the animal was standing at the time of impact. If there are two hunters, have one stay at the spot you shot from and have the other go to the spot of impact. Look for any blood or hair in the immediate area. Once you find blood, examine it to see what kind of hit the animal took. If you are an archer, look at the arrow to help determine what kind of hit it was. Bubbly blood means a shot to the lungs. Dark red blood means a heart shot. Black blood means a liver shot.

Slowly make your way towards the last place you saw the elk running, keeping your eyes on the ground, sweeping left to right to look for more blood. If you cannot find any, walk in slow circles until you see more sign. There are lighted tools that will make the blood stand out more, but they will only work at night. Mark the spot of last blood or have one hunter stay there and make a slow circle at about 10 feet.

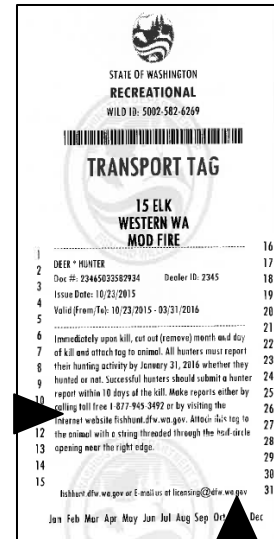
If you cannot find blood at 10 feet, adjust your distance. Remember that this is SLOW and METHODICAL tracking. Continue on until you find the animal. If while you are tracking you hear the animal rise and run off again, wait another 30 minutes before continuing the tracking effort. When you find the animal, approach it from behind and verify it has expired. This can be done by gently poking the animal with a stick or your hunting equipment. If not, dispatch the animal as humanely as possible.



Photo by Mark Peaslee

Tagging

Immediately after any big game animal has been killed, the appropriate tag of the person who has taken the animal must be validated by cutting out and completely removing the month and day of kill. The month and day must be completely removed. A slit is not acceptable. Then the tag must be securely attached to the carcass in a visible manner. A favorite way to attach the tag is with electrical tape on the antler. However the Washington tags have little holes in the right hand side of the tag. This is a good spot to feed a zip tie through and attach it to an antler or an ear.



Field Dressing

Field dressing is removing the internal organs from the animal. This should be done as soon as practical after the animal is recovered. Doing this sooner decreases the chances that the intestines, stomachs, and other areas of the elk that have digestive juices may rupture. There are many valid ways in which to field dress elk. Below you will find a recommended way to field dress. For other ways to field dress elk, search for elk field dressing videos online.

- Roll the elk onto its back.
- Find the bottom of the ribcage.
- Insert your knife just below the bottom of the ribcage angled towards the head.
- Cut up the sternum towards the head, splitting the breastbone to the base of the neck.
- Return to the bottom of the ribcage.
- Place the knife between your index and middle fingers while keeping the blade tip covered
- Slowly cut down the belly to the base of the anus.
 - You can also use a knife with a gut hook if you have one.
 - Make sure to leave proof of sex naturally attached to the carcass.
- Cut around the anus and pull it out slightly.
- Tie the anus in a knot or use some string around the exposed lower intestine to make sure no droppings get on your meat.
- Cut into the meat to expose the pelvis.
- Using a bone saw or sharp hatchet, carefully split the pelvis where the lower intestine goes through the bone.
- Move back up to the neck area.
- Sever the windpipe as high as you can.
- Tie this into a knot or close it with string.
- If you want to keep and eat the heart, move down to the chest cavity and remove it.
 - The heart and liver are eaten by some hunters. Place these organs into a game bag to keep them clean and cool.

- Slowly cut the diaphragm that separated the heart and lungs from the intestines and stomach making sure not to puncture any organs.
- Move along the spine and detach the innards as close to the backbone as possible.
- Gently pull the lower intestines out from between the split bone.
- If you want to keep the liver, collect it from the entrails now.
- Once all connections are severed, roll the animal on to its side and slide the entrails out.

Skinning

Skinning the animal will help cool the meat faster. You can decide to skin the animal on the ground, or you can hang it and skin it while it is hanging. You can purchase a gambrel and pulley to hoist the animal up, but this is not required.

- Make small vertical cuts in the hind legs just below the ankle area inside the ligament that controls the lower leg.
- Put your gambrel hooks through those cuts.
- Hoist the animal up.
- Make a cut in the skin, but not into the meat around the hind leg just below the point the elk is hanging. Go slow and make sure not to cut that tendon.
- Make a cut from the previous step to the pelvis area where the meat is exposed.
- Make little cuts along this line to create a flap you can hang on to.
- Pull the skin away from the meat and cut the connective tissue. Try not to cut into the meat.
- Once you have skinned the entire leg, repeat the previous four steps for the second hind leg.
- If you are skinning at home you can now cut the tail off.
- Pull down on the skin to help separate it from the meat.
- While holding downward pressure, cut the connective tissue sometimes referred to as silver skin. Just run the knife along the edge where the meat and skin meet as you pull.
- If you are going to want the skin tanned, try not to nick the hide.
- Start working around the carcass and making the cuts as needed.
- Once you get to the front legs, cut around the knee joint.
- There is very little meat in the lower leg.
- Once you have severed the tendons, if you bend the leg to the side it becomes easier to remove.
- Do this on the other leg as well.
- Now that the legs are off, continue skinning down the legs and onto the neck.
- Skin down to about four inches from the skull.
- Use your bone saw to cut through the spine just above where the skin is still attached to the carcass.
- A hack saw could also be used but make sure it is a clean blade.
- At this point you can process the carcass yourself or you can check with a local butcher shop that may be able to process game animals for a fee.

Processing

Processing the carcass is the final step before you can enjoy some of the deliciousness that waits. To process the carcass, you can break it down yourself or you can take it to a local butcher shop that processes game animals. There is a fee to have the carcass processed by the butcher shop, but it is cut just like beef.

If you process it yourself, you may not get the beautiful steaks and roasts that come out of a butcher shop. Videos of how to process elk can be found online or can be purchased at local sporting goods stores and online stores. However, if you do choose to process yourself, remember that the meat has to be protected from the freezer and freezer burn. A vacuum sealer can help your game last for many months to come.

Elk Hoof Disease in Southwest Washington

Over the past decade, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has received a growing number of reports of elk hobbled by missing or misshapen hooves in southwest Washington. This is a major concern for hunters, area residents, and state wildlife managers. Analysis of tissue from deformed hooves indicates the condition is likely caused by a bacterial disease similar to one found in livestock.

Test results of diseased hooves sent to five diagnostic laboratories since 2013 point to infectious treponeme bacteria, which have been linked to digital dermatitis in domestic sheep and cattle. A 16-member technical panel of veterinarians and researchers, formed by WDFW to review test results from affected elk, has supported those findings.



For more information on Hoof Disease please see the department's website, <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/diseases/elk-hoof>.

Hunter Reporting

Hunter reporting is an integral part of hunting any animal that requires a tag. It allows WDFW staff members to accurately measure the harvest, and coupled with winter surveys of the animal species, will help with the season setting process next year. Since the information is necessary for WDFW to effectively manage the game animals, this is a mandatory report even if you did not harvest. If you fail to report by the deadline of January 31, you will be subject to a \$10 administrative penalty.

Below is a step by step process to report your tags. If you have trouble with the online system, you can also call 877-945-3492 and report by phone.

- Go to fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov
- Under the "I want to Submit" section on the left hand side (Highlighted in Orange), Select "Hunter Report".
- Select the "Submit Report" Box in the top left hand corner of the page.
- Enter all customer information fields. Then click "GO".
- If an error occurs, "customer not found, please try your search again." Verify the information that was entered.
- Select the first species under the "Choose a tag to report on:" section.
- Answer all questions that are on the screen. The questions will change based on the answers provided.
- When completed, the report will issue a message that says, "You have finished the hunter report. Click FINISH to save all of your answers. Click "FINISH" when completed.
- A confirmation page will come up that will show the report has been submitted successfully.
- Write down the submittal date and the confirmation number, this information may need to be referenced at a future date.
- When completed use the Back button on the screen and it will take you back to the page that shows which tags need to be reported on or have been reported.
- Repeat the process for all tags with an outstanding report.
- This information is used to set future hunting seasons in conjunction with WDFW field staff population surveys.

Ten Basic Safety Rules

1. Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction and under control.
2. Treat every firearm as if it were loaded.
3. Keep your finger off the trigger until ready to fire. Use your safety, but remember that safeties sometimes fail.
4. Be sure of your target and what lies beyond before firing.
5. Never place or carry a loaded firearm in a motor vehicle.
6. Never use a firearm unless you are familiar with how it works. If you need an owner's manual, write to the manufacturer.
7. Never cross a fence, climb a tree, cross a stream or jump a ditch with a loaded firearm.
8. Never point at anything you do not want to shoot.
9. Unload firearms when not in use. Store firearms and ammunition separately.
10. Never use alcohol (or drugs) before or during shooting.

Learn More about WDFW's Hunter Education Program

Website

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/huntered/>

Email

huntered@dfw.wa.gov

Regional Offices

Region 1 Spokane Office: (509) 892-1001
Region 2 Ephrata Office: (509) 754-4624
Region 3 Yakima Office: (509) 575-2740
Region 4 Mill Creek Office: (425) 775-1311
Region 5 Vancouver Office: (360) 696-6211
Region 6 Montesano Office: (360) 239-4628
Headquarters Olympia Office: (360) 902-8111

More Information

For more information about the Hunter Education Program, contact our staff in Olympia at (360) 902-8111.

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If you need further assistance or information, please contact the Olympia office of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: (360) 902-2349, or Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), (360) 902-2207.