

How to Win the Big-Game Lotto

by Kyle Wintersteen, Associate Editor

As you read this, application deadlines for certain select tags are already days from closing. This is no time for a hangfire—get your applications in now. Here are the deadlines, herd reports, trophy units, suggested tags and more.

It's late winter and chances are you're picking off decoy-shy resident geese, taking advantage of coyotes' rumbling bellies or overlooking a crop field with your in-line. Maybe even looking ahead to turkey season. But think back to September. Remember when the Aspens were turning a golden hue and the nighttime air grew crisp? The daydreams of hunting Brown County, L., bucks, Rocky Mountain bulls or maybe even the monstrous creatures of Alaska? If you wait until those signs of autumn return, it'll be too late. Some western tags are drawn as early as January, so make this the year you finally plan your dream hunt and apply now. To make it that much easier for you, we've broken down the opportunities by state and listed pertinent contact information, tips and hot units. Enjoy the winter's remaining seasons, but be sure to get your applications in now to ensure a memorable fall.

State-By-State Tag Draws

Most dates, license fees and other facts are from the 2007-2008 season—at press time many states had not yet released their 2008 dates and fees. The dates and fees listed here are what you can expect to generally find in each state. There are many special seasons and exceptions to tag and license fees; in fact, in some states big-game seasons vary by unit. Consider this guide your starting point to choosing your dream hunt and then use the contact information and hot units provided here to dig deeper.

ALASKA

Dall sheep, moose, caribou, bear, blacktail deer and more are available in Alaska. The application deadline for draw-only areas is generally in December or May, depending on the hunt. If you miss the deadline or you don't get a tag, you should ask the Alaska Department of Fish and Game about registration hunts. Over-the-counter permits are given to nonresidents as well as residents and hunting is open until a quota is filled.

Moose are the most sought after big-game animal in Alaska. Hunters harvest about 7,000 of the state's estimated 75,000 moose each year. Moose are especially dense in south-central and interior Alaska. Portions of units 21, 22 and 24 are so popular they've been regulated by a draw since 2004. Check with biologists before booking a hunt because some herds have been impacted by predation.

In other news, caribou herds throughout the state are reported to be stable or lightly increasing.

Then there are the bears. Black bear populations in Unit 6 in Prince William Sound are at near-record highs. Black bears are most vulnerable when they feed in beach vegetation in the spring, which is reflected in the conservative limit of one bear per year. A hunter can legally shoot only one brown/grizzly bear every four

years in some units, whereas many units allow one bear per year. In units 16B, 19A, 19D, 20E or 22A, two bears may be taken, or one bear may be taken in addition to another legally filled tag. Bears are so thick in those units they're limiting the growth of local moose or caribou populations.

Preference Points: No

License Fees: Residents pay \$25 and nonresidents \$85 for licenses. Nonresident tag fees range from \$225 for black bear to \$400 for moose to \$1,100 for musk ox. (907-465-2376;

admin.adfg.state.ak.us/license)

Outfitters: Licensed guides are required for nonresident brown/grizzly bear, Dall sheep and mountain goat hunters. (907-465-2543;

dced.state.ak.us/occ/GuiUseReg.cfm)

Application Deadline: Dec. 6 of the previous year for all fall sheep and goat hunts, some moose hunts and some spring bear hunts; May 31 for some fall hunts, including some draw hunts for moose and caribou and most Kodiak and Unimak Island bear, elk and musk ox tags.

Contact: Alaska Department of Fish and Game (907-267-2137; adfg.state.ak.us)

ARIZONA

Elk, mule deer and antelope are mostly why hunters travel to Arizona. The four big northern units in Arizona are all tops



Photos: Ron Spomer

for trophy pronghorn. Antelope that tied for the Boone and Crocket Club (B&C) record were killed in Mohave and Coconino in 2002 and 2000, respectively. Coconino also happens to be the state's best mule deer county and, incidentally, from Coconino County east may be the world's best area for B&C elk.

Preference Points: Arizona draws use bonus points, which you can buy for \$7.50 apiece without participating in the drawing.

Application Deadline: June 12 for elk and pronghorn. June 10 for all other fall permit hunts. Inconveniently, licenses and tags are no longer available online or by telephone. To locate a license dealer phone 602-942-3000 or logon to azgfd.gov/eservices/licenses.shtml.

License Fees: A general hunting license costs \$32.25 for residents. Nonresidents can pay \$151.25 or buy a 3-day license for \$61.25. A nonresident deer permit is \$232.75; elk, \$595; antelope, \$485; and bighorn sheep, \$1,407.50.

Outfitters: No official state organization

Contact: Arizona Game and Fish Department (602-942-3000; azgfd.gov)

CALIFORNIA

California may be populating so fast it's outgrowing its bridges, but the public owns 51 percent of the state. The blacktail deer, elk and mule deer hunting can be excellent, as can wild hog—California hunters shoot nearly as many hogs as deer.

Though the state animal may be a grizzly, California ranks fifth nationally (it was fourth until recently) with the number of black bears in the B&C record book. As for blacktail, the two top trophy areas in the country are Trinity and Mendocino counties. California is liberalizing some of its blacktail seasons to reduce herds that are eating up habitat. The permit-only X Zones are your best bet for mature bucks, or hunt late September for A-Zone blacktails in the Mendocino National Forest.

Preference Points: Yes; preference

points are awarded to unsuccessful applicants for big-game tags.

Application Deadline: June 4
dfg.ca.gov/licensing/index.html)

License Fees: A basic hunting license costs residents \$37.30, nonresidents \$129.40. Nonresident deer tags cost \$219.20, \$500 for sheep, \$1,050 for elk, \$59.60 for wild hogs and \$220 for bears. Residents pay \$24.95 for deer tags, \$320 for sheep and \$339.50 for elk, \$17.85 for wild hogs and \$36.50 for bears.

Outfitters: There is a list. See: dfg.ca.gov/licensing/pdf/files/license_outfitterslist.pdf

Contact: California Department of Fish and Game (916-445-0411; dfg.ca.gov)

COLORADO

This is the nonresident elk hotspot. Colorado has the most elk of any state (more than 270,000 at last count), and it offers over-the-counter bull tags. But there are also a lot of trophy areas in the state that are worth applying for. With a statewide 5-percent hunter-success rate, Colorado is the best state in the West for general-ag hunters, especially on the Western slope around Meeker and Craig. A lot of southern and western units are managed for big bulls; for example, Unit 61 on the Incomphagre Plateau is managed for quality bulls and mule deer and units 66 and 67 in southwestern Colorado have more than their share of trophies.

Preference Points: Yes

Application Deadline: April 6 for all big-game permits (800-244-5613; wildlife.state.co.us/total/licensing)

License Fees: Resident elk licenses are \$46, deer and antelope licenses go for \$31 and moose, sheep and goat tags sell for \$25. Nonresident bull and either-sex elk cost \$501; cow elk, \$251; deer and antelope, \$301; moose, sheep and goats, \$1,716.16.

Outfitters: Colorado Outfitters Association (colorado-outfitters.com) or Colorado Outfitters and Guides (colorado-outfitters-guides.com)

Contact: Colorado Division of Wildlife (303-297-1192; wildlife.state.co.us)

IDAHO

Northern Idaho is one of the top areas for trophy mule deer and elk. Its rugged backcountry allows animals to consistently reach maturity. Southern Idaho has some good antelope units and some excellent whitetail hotspots on public land. The southeast region is producing big mule



deer. Hells Canyon (areas 11 and 18) is one of the West's best trophy elk areas, and units 45 and 52 in the Bennett Hills are great. Unit 62 (between the Fall and Teton rivers) is a top trophy zone for moose.

Preference Points: No

Application Deadline: Feb. 15 for spring black bear; April 30 for moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goat; June 5 for deer, elk, antelope and fall black bear. If you strike out, apply for a leftover/unclaimed tag by June 25 for moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goats or August 15 for deer, elk, antelope and fall black bear. (800-554-8685; <http://id.outdoorcentral.us/>)

License Fees: Resident hunters pay \$27.50 for deer, \$19.25 for fall bear, \$38.50 for elk, \$39 for antelope and \$174.50 for moose, sheep and goat tags. A nonresident elk tag costs \$380.25; deer, \$266.25; fall bear, \$159.50; and sheep, moose and goat, \$1,759.50.

Outfitters: Idaho Outfitters & Guides Association (800-49-IDAHO; ioga.org)

Contact: Idaho Department of Fish and Game (208-334-3700; fishandgame.idaho.gov)

MONTANA

There are outfitter-sponsored tags available in most areas. Though Montana is known for elk, mule deer and antelope, it is still the preeminent trophy bighorn sheep state in the West—consider districts 210, 216 and 622 for wall hangers. The areas northwest of Yellowstone National Park yield trophy bull elk. The state reports thriving populations in districts 282 and 285. Also, check out District 380 (Elkhorn Mountains), the Missouri Breaks or late-season Gardiner hunts. If you don't like climbing mountains, eastern Montana has wonderfully open terrain filthy with mule deer and some of the best pronghorn hunting in the country.

Preference Points: Yes; Montana has elective bonus points, which means

you get another throw in the draw if you pay extra (\$2 for residents, \$20 for nonresidents).

Application Deadline: April 14 for spring bears and August 31 for fall bears; October 4 for bison; March 15 for elk/deer combination tag; March 15 for landowner- or outfitter-sponsored deer, elk and antelope tags; June 1 for deer, elk and antelope regular drawing; and May 1 for moose, sheep and goats. (406-444-2950; app.mt.gov/Ats/index)

License Fees: Residents pay around \$25 for elk, \$20 for deer, bears and antelope, \$125 for bison and \$130 for moose, sheep and goats. Nonresidents pay \$643 for a combination deer/elk license; \$1,195 for an outfitter-sponsored guaranteed deer/elk combo; \$350 for bears; \$343 for a general deer license; \$80 for a region-specific deer tag; \$845 for an outfitter-sponsored guaranteed deer tag; \$205 for antelope; and \$755 for moose, sheep and goat permits.

Outfitters: Montana Outfitters and Guides Association (406-449-3578; www.montana.org; montanaoutfitters.org)

Contact: Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (406-444-2535; wp.mt.gov)

NEVADA

Though drought and limited draws make this state a lesser elk destination than many others, it is producing some monsters, especially in northern units such as 111 and 222, both of which are good mule deer units, too. The northeastern corner of the state glows red with B&C antelope entries. There are three subspecies of sheep in the state, making Nevada ground zero for sheep zealots.

Preference Points: Yes

Application Deadline: March 9 for nonresident guided deer, April 16 for the main drawing and July 2 for unclaimed/leftover tags. (800-576-1020; wildnevada.com)

License Fees: For a basic hunting license, residents pay \$33. Nonresidents pay \$142. Tags are extra, of course. Resident tag costs are \$30 for deer, \$60 for antelope and \$120 for mountain goats, sheep and elk. Nonresidents pay \$240 for deer, \$300 for antelope and \$1,200 for mountain goats, sheep and elk.

Outfitters: There is a list. See: ndow.org/hunt/resources/guides

Contact: Nevada Department of Wildlife (775-688-1500; ndow.org)





NEW MEXICO

New Mexico is known for its mule deer; in fact, the nation's best county is northern New Mexico's Rio Arriba County. Even there are the elk. Southeastern New Mexico is a top trophy area, as are the north-central units. The best bull-to-cow ratios are in the Jemez herd around Alamogordo, the Northeast herd east of Raton and the Sacramento herd in Unit 34. The state has "undersubscribed" trophy-deer areas in Unit 2, east of Farmington. The west-central counties of Catron, Socorro and Lincoln have contributed a disproportionate share of B&C pronghorns. Incredibly, Mora County has a B&C pronghorn entry for every 25 square miles, making it the best county in the country when you consider size.

Preference Points: No

Application Deadline: Feb. 6 for bear and oryx hunting permits; April 9 for all deer, elk, antelope, bighorn sheep, ibex and javelina permits. (800-862-9310; <http://nwdgs.state.nm.us/loapp/permits/> by 01/01/2010)

License Fees: Nonresident fees are \$543 for standard bull elk or \$768 for mature bull areas; \$278 for antelope; \$270 for standard deer or \$355 for high-demand deer units; \$3,168 for bighorn sheep; \$260 for bears; \$1,618 for oryx; \$1,618 for ibex; and \$173 for javelina. Residents pay \$91 for all elk, \$39 for deer, \$61 for antelope, \$161 for sheep, \$47 for bears; \$161 for oryx; \$111 for ibex; and \$66 for javelina.

Outfitters: New Mexico Council of Outfitters and Guides (nmcwg.org)

Contact: New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (505-476-8000; <http://nwdgs.state.nm.us>)

NORTH DAKOTA

While the debate rages on whether whitetails are overtaking mule deer habitat, both species continue to lure hunters to North Dakota. The Game and Fish Department reports stable muley and whitetail deer populations and a slightly

increasing antelope herd. The southwestern counties of Bowman, Slope, Golden Valley and Billings have the densest antelope. For your best chance at a muley, stick to the western badlands from Bowman County north to McKenzie and Dunn. Whitetails can be found throughout the state, even in Badlands river bottoms, but concentrations are particularly high in the northeast counties of Grand Forks, Nelson, Ramsey and Walsh.

Preference Points: Yes

Application Deadline: June 6 for deer; August 8 for pronghorn. (800-406-6409; http://nwdgs.state.nd.us/ndgs/wildlife_services/wildlife_application_forms.cfm)

License Fees: General hunting licenses cost \$13. Nonresidents pay \$200 for deer and archery-only antelope tags. Residents pay \$20 for deer and antelope tags.

Outfitters: North Dakota Professional Guides and Outfitters Association (<http://ndpgo.com>)

Contact: North Dakota Game and Fish Department (701-328-6300; <http://nwdgs.gov>)

OREGON

South-central Oregon is an increasingly hot antelope destination and the state also has strong mule deer and elk populations east of the Cascades. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reported that dry conditions have slightly impacted deer populations, however, this has not warranted a significant change in tag allocations. Elk and mule deer populations are stable and have good sex ratios, but are a little below the long-term population goal. The eastern region's blacktails continue to suffer from occasional outbreaks of deer hair-loss syndrome, which leads to hair loss, discoloration, weight loss and, potentially, exposure-related death. Biologists report that the disease is difficult to monitor due to the blacktail's dense habitat, but it seems to have leveled off with only occasional flare-ups. Antlerless blacktail tag allocations were reduced by 11 percent in 2005, but have changed little since. The antelope population has been slowly but steadily on the rise, and a tag increase reflects that.

Preference Points: Yes

Application Deadline: Feb. 20 for spring bears. May 15 for all other big game. (503-947-6100; <http://odfw.gov> or <http://odfw.state.or.us/wildlife/management/antelope/>)

License Fees: Nonresidents pay \$76.50 for a basic hunting license, \$151.50 for a



Photo: Lon E. Lauber

black bear tag, \$361.50 for elk, \$264.50 for deer, \$277.50 for antelope and \$1,083.50 for bighorn sheep. Resident fees are \$22.50 for the basic hunting license and \$36.50 for an antelope tag, \$11.50 for black bears, \$101.50 for bighorn sheep, \$19.50 for deer and \$34.50 for elk.

Outfitters: Oregon Guides & Packers Association (800-747-9552; ogpa.org)

Contact: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (503-947-6000; odfw.state.or.us)

SOUTH DAKOTA

Most nonresident hunters venture to South Dakota in search of Chinese gamebirds, but muley, whitetail and antelope hunting opportunities abound. As a nonresident, your best bet for a trophy buck is a West River Special Buck license, but they're difficult to draw, unit-specific and require prior arrangements with an outfitter or private landowner. You could also try for an East River Special Buck license, but nonresidents aren't eligible until the third drawing.

Preference Points: Yes

Application Deadline: Aug. 10 for antelope, April 20 for Special Buck, July 27 for Black Hills deer and West River deer, and August 31 for East River deer. (605-773-3485; <http://sdgameandfish.com/> application; <http://odfw.gov/wildlife/southdakota/>)

License Fees: Nonresidents pay \$195 for regular deer and antelope tags or \$245 for two such tags and \$505 for West River Special Buck tags. Residents pay \$35 for deer and antelope tags or \$45 for two tags and \$155 for Special Buck tags.

Outfitters: There is no official state organization.

Contact: South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (605-773-3485; sdgameandfish.com)

UTAH

The entire state of Utah can produce trophy mule deer. Big elk generally come from western units and pronghorn from the east and west sides of the state. The

orthern region rarely gets enough deer applications. You'll find better trophies, but poorer odds, in the southeastern region and for special Paunsaugunt, Henry Mountain and Book Cliffs deer and West Desert elk. Here's a tip: In return for completing a wildlife management course and volunteering to help DWR with conservation work, a "Dedicated Hunter" receives a guaranteed buck tag for three years in the region of his/her choice and gets to hunt all three seasons.

reference Points: Yes

application Deadline: Feb. 28 for black bear tags. Feb. 16 for most other big game. (wildlife.utah.gov/licenses; or contact the state's licensing contractor: 800-221-0659;

nevada.com/webutapps)

license Fees: Nonresidents pay \$65 for a basic hunting license, \$388 for a general elk tag, \$795 for a limited-entry bull elk tag, \$263 for deer, \$308 for a bear, \$288 for pronghorn, \$463 for limited-entry deer and \$1,513 for sheep, goats or moose. Residents pay \$26 for a basic hunting license, \$280 for a limited-entry bull elk tag, \$45 for a general bull tag, \$83 for a bear, \$50 for a pronghorn, \$15 for a general deer tag, \$75 for a limited-entry deer tag, \$508 for a sheep and \$408 for a moose or goat.

outfitters: Utah Guide and Outfitters Association
tah.com/database/guides)

contact: Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (wildlife.utah.gov)

WASHINGTON

The state runs a popular raffle for a number of big-game tags, so if you're feeling lucky, shell out \$5 to \$11 for a shot at deer, elk and bighorn sheep permits. Further south blacktail deer are in double, but in much of Washington you can find healthy numbers, and there's good access on national forest land west of the Cascade Crest. Give Lewis County around Centralia a try—it has grown a lot of B&C heads over the years.

reference Points: Yes; bonus points are awarded to unsuccessful applicants for most species.

application Deadline: June 28

license Fees: For deer or elk, residents pay \$39.42 and nonresidents pay \$94.20; for deer/elk combo permits, residents pay \$61.32 and nonresidents pay \$613.20; and for deer, elk, bear and cougar combos, residents pay



\$72.27 and nonresidents pay \$722.70. A bear/cougar combo tag costs residents \$21.90 and nonresidents \$219.

Outfitters: Washington Outfitters and Guides Association (509-997-1080; woga.org)

Contact: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (360-902-2200; wdfw.wa.gov)

WYOMING

Wyoming has some of the country's best bighorn sheep and Shiras moose hunting, however, elk, antelope and mule deer are what most hunters seek. The south-central area of the state, especially Carbon County, is the epicenter for pronghorn hunting. As for deer, though Region G deer have suffered a few bad winters, the area is still one of the best spots in the West to bag a trophy alpine muley. General-tag opportunities are easy to draw, especially in the any-elk areas in the Snowy Range, Sierra Madre and public land around Jackson. And there are many units, mostly in low, arid mountain ranges, that have limited-draw trophy elk hunting worth applying for.

Preference Points: Yes; for bighorn sheep and moose only.

Application Deadline: Jan. 31 for nonresident elk; March 15 for nonresident deer and antelope; Feb. 29 for all moose, sheep and goat; May 31 for resident deer, elk and antelope. (307-777-4600; gamestate.wy.us/elsapplication)

License Fees: Nonresidents pay \$481 for elk, \$261 for deer, \$226 for antelope, \$1,201 for moose, \$1,801 for mountain goats and \$1,901 for sheep. Residents pay \$43 for elk, \$31 for deer, \$27 for antelope, \$91 for moose, \$101 for mountain goats and \$96 for sheep permits.

Outfitters: Wyoming Board of Outfitters (800-264-0981; outfitters.state.wy.us)

Contact: Wyoming Game and Fish Department (307-777-4600; gfd.state.wy.us) **dh**

the Whitetail Triangle

Whitetails have undoubtedly carved out a special place in the hearts of American hunters, so much so that almost every issue of this magazine devotes at least one article to the subject. Here are the application summaries for the three states offering the most coveted draws in deer hunting: Illinois, Kansas and Iowa.

Preference Points:

Illinois No

Kansas Yes; points are awarded to unsuccessful nonresident applicants or can be purchased for \$21.15.

Iowa No

Application Deadlines:

Illinois 1st lottery, April 30 (residents only); 2nd lottery, Aug. 14; enter random daily drawings until Oct. 18. (888-6-PERMIT; wildlifelicense.com/il/start.php)

Kansas May 31 for nonresidents and Dec. 30 for residents (800-918-2877; wildlifelicense.com/ks/index.php)

Iowa June 3 for nonresidents; reapplications accepted throughout season (800-367-1188; wildlifelicense.com/ia/start.php)

License Fees:

Illinois Nonresidents pay \$5.50 for habitat stamps, \$28.75 for 5-day hunting licenses, \$50.75 for regular licenses and \$250 for either-sex deer permits. Residents pay \$15 for hunting licenses and \$15 for deer permits.

Kansas Nonresidents pay \$72.15 for hunting licenses and \$322.15 for deer permits. Residents pay \$20.15 for hunting licenses and \$32.15 for deer permits.

Iowa All deer hunters pay \$11.50 habitat fees. Nonresidents pay \$80.50 for hunting licenses and \$323.50 for deer tags. Residents pay \$17.50 for hunting licenses and \$27 for deer tags.

Outfitters:

Illinois has a list at: dnr.state.il.us/Law3/outfitter/OutfitterListingWeb.pdf
Kansas Outfitters Association (866-294-1947; kansasoutfittersassociation.com)
Iowa has no official organization.

Contacts:

Illinois DNR (217-782-6302; dnr.state.il.us)
Kansas Dept. of Wildlife and Parks (620-672-5911; kdwp.state.ks.us)
Iowa DNR (515-281-5918; iowadnr.com)