

BEYOND THE SCORE

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The North American 29

These words, in my childhood, sparked many an imaginary trip. Prior to diving into the job market, I had visions of going everywhere and hunting the world. Then I got a degree in biology, and reality set in. But I am an optimist; I always try to find a solution to even the most insurmountable challenge and try to approach it with vigor to prove those naysayers that it can be done. As application season approaches, my scheming begins. While this article won't tell you exactly what units you need to apply for, it will give you a general idea of states with draw deadlines before the next issue of *Fair Chase* comes out, and what they can offer for trophy species directed to the on-your-own trophy hunter.

The first state that wants your application is Alaska. November 1 to mid-December is the draw window, and it can be done online. If you want to chase as many different species as possible, this is a must-apply state: you can cross off musk ox, bison, barren ground caribou, Alaska-Yukon moose, Sitka blacktail deer, and black bear in this state—all unguided, assuming you can draw for musk ox and bison.

ALASKA Black Bear

Alaska is the only state that specifically designates certain tags for non-resident unguided bear hunts. Some states do a different draw for outfitter tags, but it is not really the same as holding a nonresident unguided tag. Southeast Alaska is home to some of the largest black bears in North America. While the state ranks No. 3 behind Wisconsin and Pennsylvania for bruins, the dense rainforests of southeast Alaska put out their fair share of huge boars. Prince of Wales Island historically was a powerhouse, and while it

still produces true monsters, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) has adopted some stringent regulations trying to curb overharvest throughout southeast Alaska. I am thinking in the next ten years or so, these effects will start to show and that area of the country may become the premier destination for those wanting to chase a huge bear on their own. Be aware if you are looking to hunt in the spring—an application for some southeast areas is 18 months prior to the start date. My application this year won't be valid until spring of 2015 if I draw. Currently the tags are fairly easy to pull, but not quite guaranteed. In 1996 the southeast's remote Kuiu Island put out a bear with a whopping 22-15/16 inch skull, that is also the current Alaska state record black bear.

Musk ox

Musk ox numbers are limited in Alaska. The huntable population is a reintroduced herd, but it is doing well. You may have to hire a local resident to transport you on Nunivak Island—not a cheap hunt—but you can hunt musk ox unguided. They are long odds, but you'll never get drawn if you don't apply. There are two hunt periods from which to choose. The question comes down to, "Do you want to freeze or be carried off by bugs?" The early hunt has the bugs, the later hunt will be cold. While I haven't done this hunt yet, I have heard arguments for both seasons. Alaska is the No. 1 location

in the records for book musk ox entries, and the top particular location in the records is Nunivak Island. It is worth noting though, that only one entry from Alaska breaks the top 150 entries and that one currently sits at No. 143. You probably won't be breaking a World's Record, but if you draw, you may get a musk ox.

Sitka Blacktail Deer

The breakdown for Sitka blacktail deer is interesting; basically two locations account for over 90 percent of the entries—southeast Alaska, which is nearly all part of the Tongass National Forest (69,000 km²), and the Kodiak Archipelago (14,000km²). Overall they are very close with 50 percent of Sitka blacktail entries coming from Southeast and 42 percent coming from the



Musk ox
Location: Seward Peninsula, AK
Hunter: Mark Wayne Smith
Year: 2011
Score: 112-2/8



Black Bear
Location: Kuiu Island, AK
Hunter: Craig D. Martin
Year: 1996
Score: 22-15/16



This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt believed strongly that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

Kodiak Archipelago. An interesting note is that starting in 2000, the Kodiak Archipelago has accounted for 41 entries and the Southeast has accounted for 87. Kodiak has a higher density of book deer if you figure in entry/area, or at least a higher entry rate, but over the last decade, Southeast is where you want to be for the biggest blacktails. This one doesn't require drawing a tag, and it is not a cheap hunt, but affordable.

If you want a sheep-hunt feel, go early, climb to the highest peak above tree line, and hunt bucks in the velvet. This one costs you a plane ticket to Alaska and a floatplane ride, but after that, where you get off and what you do is up to you. It will rain; everything you have will be wet, and this should be a major consideration in your planning. A week of rain isn't even noteworthy up there, it's just October. I can't do an exact calculation of bucks taken from Prince of Wales Island, but it is the No. 1 location for Sitkas, even though those listed with a more precise location such as Coffman's Cove or Thorne Bay aren't included in that calculation.

Bison

While I am not a geneticist, I have heard Alaska's free ranging bison herds are the purest form of the bison that once freely roamed the continent. These

hunts require a little more research that must be done since the herds frequent private and tribal lands. Access is generally not denied, but a trespass fee may be necessary, which is clearly stated in the Alaska hunting regulations. Once you draw the permit, start your preparations. This one will be intense but not impossible. There are a few options for different hunts, and by perusing the hunt draw supplement, you can get enough details to make the decision that works best for you. The Delta Junction hunt has the most entries listed, and Alaska is the No. 4 state overall for bison.

Alaska-Yukon Moose

You can hunt moose in Alaska unguided, but there is lots of research to be done for this one. What I have found is that transportation becomes the issue. A drop-hunt can produce, but I have not had great success with a stationary location. If I am not in game, I want the ability to move. But while I may be able to walk to a better area, getting a moose back to camp could literally be impossible. A boat is mandatory, and it must be a big enough boat to get you where you want to go and get a moose out. There are some great books on float hunting, and that seems to be the Do It Yourself (DIY) way to have the best success. A jet boat and a run up some of the many rivers can put you in prime moose country—if you can

find a jet boat to use. For a moose, figure out the type

of hunt you want, where you want to go, then look at the draw odds if a draw is necessary at all. I spent seven days there on a DIY hunt, and while we found 35 moose paddles in an hour, we never saw a legal bull. This area had lots of moose sign, and we were only a short boat ride from one of the few highways in Alaska and the tag was over-the-counter. Top bulls are still being taken, and Alaska dominates the other locations where these bulls are found with 756 entries from Alaska and 118 from the Yukon. Huge bulls have been taken all over the state. In B&C's Trophy Search database, the Koyukuk River and Alaska Peninsula are tops with entries in the 40s, but these are very large areas.

Caribou

This one is on my list of hunts to try, but I haven't done the leg work yet. Caribou entries are significantly down for four of the five categories recognized by the Club. Mountain caribou seems to be the only category where we continue to see top trophies being entered. The 22nd Awards Period (1992-1994) had 151 barren ground caribou entries; the 28th (2010-2012) had just 25 entries, with nearly half of them being taken in previous awards periods and not entered. The DIY hunt that I seem to hear the most about is the Haul Road/Dalton Highway, you have to use a bow within a certain distance, but walk beyond that and a rifle is fine. Some bulls are harvested, but for the most part I don't see many book bulls coming from there. There are some draw units for caribou, but I believe the majority of these are areas close to roads for herds whose numbers have dropped. There are no caribou draw hunts that I have identified that give you a better chance at a good bull than a general tag, a chartered plane, and good timing.

Goat, Dall's Sheep, Grizzly Bear, Brown Bear

Alaska law requires that you have a guide on these hunts, so put your research into an outfitter as you need documentation to even apply for these species as a non-resident from the outfitter you intend to go with. Some tags do require a draw, so plan early to get on some of the top concessions.



Barren Ground Caribou
Location: Scotty Lake, AK
Hunter: Devin J. Hubble
Year: 2010
Score: 434-4/8

MONTANA

Montana's draw is on or around March 15, but this is only for non-resident deer and elk combo licenses and the limited units for those two species for both non-residents and residents. It is worth noting the last few years these combos have not sold out and can be purchased while supplies last. You have until May 1 for Montana trophy species (moose, sheep, goat, bison, etc.), so I will break those down in a future *Faire Chase* article.

Montana has lots of public land, and with the right technology in your hands



Typical American Elk

Location: Big Horn County, MT
Hunter: Salvatore Blancato
Year: 2008
Score: 391-6/8

Pronghorn

Location: Carbon County, WY
Hunter: Howard R. French
Year: 2012
Score: 91-4/8



allowing you to quickly identify public lands (check out HuntingGPSmaps.com), a DIY hunt is very feasible for any species for which you can draw or buy a tag. In terms of book-caliber trophies, Montana has a strong showing for elk—No. 1 for total number of typical elk of all time and No. 2 in the last decade behind Utah. Unlike Utah, the majority of Montana tags can be purchased over-the-counter, at least on the west side of the state. Barring places like the Gardiner migration hunt, the Missouri Breaks, and a couple other mountain ranges east of the Continental Divide, a general license allows you a brow-tined bull during the rifle season (late October to Dec. 1 in 2013). Montana has some great elk and very unique opportunities. One opportunity is a general license elk hunt opening September 15 in the wilderness areas.

In terms of mule deer, Montana doesn't have near the showing. For typical mule deer entries, Montana ranks No. 13 overall with only 15 entries. There are a couple draw units worth a shot if you are buying a license anyway, but they are not a guaranteed draw like a preference point state. In Montana, you build bonus points each year you apply to the draw system. This is different from a preference point state where a certain percentage of the tags go to the top point holders. With a bonus point system, it just dictates how many times your name is in the hat, you may be in there 20 times more than the next hunter but that never guarantees you will be drawn. That being said, you can be drawn with your name in the hat only once your first year.

For the most part, the eastern part of the state is a general license hunt anywhere for mule deer. In the western half of the state, you need to apply for mule deer tags in most units. Many of these are a guaranteed tag—you just have to select a unit when you apply because that is the only unit in which you can hunt mule deer. In terms of whitetails, most units are open to whitetail buck harvest even if you have a mule deer permit for a different unit, though you just get to harvest one buck.

WYOMING

Wyoming is the final state in the first round of draw deadlines worth a look. I don't apply to Wyoming for deer or elk because of their rule forbidding nonresidents to hunt wilderness

unguided. I have friends in Wyoming that I could hunt with—and there is an exception if you are hunting with a resident—but limiting access to federal public land hunting because of residency doesn't sit well with me. In addition, every year the state puts out a list of leftover licenses, and with some homework and a quick finger on the mouse, you can have some fine hunting on these licenses. (These are the only hunts I have done.) The state also offers many regional general tags, so extensive research must be done if considering Wyoming for a hunt. Last year the elk application had to be in by late January. Moose, sheep, goat, and bison had a February 28 deadline. Deer and antelope (pronghorn) applications had to be in by March 15.

Pronghorn

A quick look at the trophy numbers makes it apparent that Wyoming is the place to be for speed goats. At the writing of this article, the state has 1,129 entries with New Mexico a distant second at 609 pronghorn entries. The top counties are as follows for all of North America:

PRONGHORN IN WYOMING		TOTAL
1.	Carbon County, WY	292
2.	Sweetwater County, WY	184
3.	Fremont County, WY	160
4.	Natrona County, WY	145

Shiras' Moose

Wyoming also tops the list for Shiras' moose entries—365—which is nearly 160 more than the No. 2 location, Idaho (208). In fact, the species was originally called the Wyoming moose.

SHIRAS' MOOSE IN WYOMING		TOTAL
1.	Teton County, WY	109
2.	Sublette County, WY	63

Tags are not an easy draw, and some have claimed predation is having an effect, but we are not seeing a major change in entries at this time. A couple other locations that historically were low in moose, Utah and Colorado, are moving up the list in the last 10 years, though Wyoming still is putting out good trophy numbers.

Elk

Wyoming is No. 4 in entries for typicals and No. 7 for non-typical. Park County leads as the top particular location for bulls. (As the name implies, it is close to



Shiras' Moose

Location: Teton County, WY
Hunter: George E. Long
Year: 1993
Score: 183-3/8



Bighorn Sheep

Location: Albany County, WY
Hunter: Mike J. Stillwell
Year: 2010
Score: 182-5/8

Bison

Location: Teton County, WY
Hunter: Stephen F. Bennett, Sr.
Year: 2009
Score: 128-4/8

Bison

Wyoming is where you want to go for bison hunts on your own. It only costs you \$20 a year to get on the list for a number. If you draw a low number, you get the opportunity to buy a bison tag. This is a once in a lifetime hunt, and the bulls are big. Wyoming is the No. 2 state for entries behind South Dakota, where all entries are from Custer State Park.

The North American 29 may not be a feasible goal in my lifetime on my budget, but through applications, a couple hundred thousand miles on my truck, and a little luck, 20 might be obtainable. Best of luck as we dive into application season. The tag you will never draw is the one you don't put in for. Somebody has to draw. It might as well be you. ■



Yellowstone.) The state does put out some fine bulls every year, but when researching, remember the wilderness rule unless you intend to go guided.

Mule Deer

Wyoming is no Colorado for muleys, but at No. 4 for typical and No. 5 for non-typical, they have some trophy bucks for sure. Between the two categories, they have 265 book mule deer. Lincoln and Carbon counties have put out 47 typical entries of this total and are toward the top of the big-buck-producing single locations—No. 4 with 25 entries and No. 5 with 22 entries respectively, throughout North America. The next county to consider is Sublette. With only eight entries and far further down the list (No. 30).

Bighorn Sheep

Wyoming is not a great sheep state in terms of entries with only 56, versus Montana's 727 entries. Park County has seven entries which leads the state and ranks No. 20 for entries per county throughout the U.S.

Mountain Goat

Similar to sheep, there aren't a ton of mountain goat entries from Wyoming—just six hunter-taken-trophies: Teton (3) Park (2) and Lincoln (1).