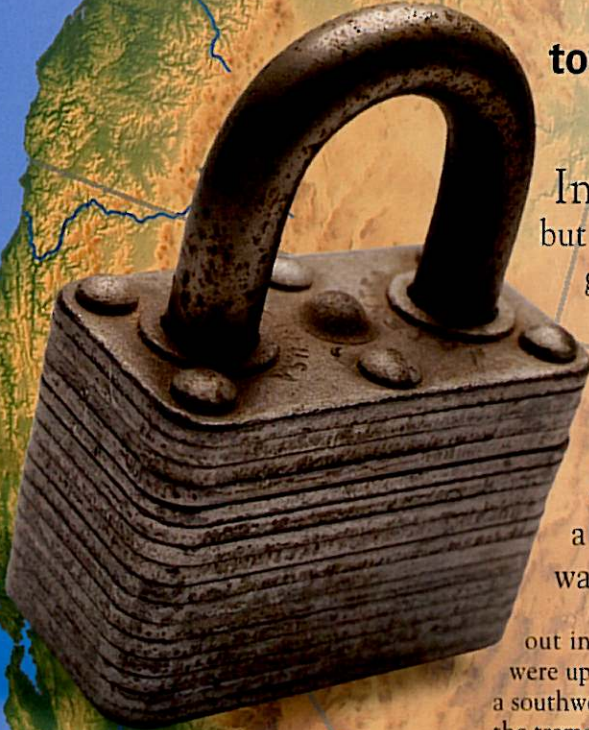


Unlocking The WESTERN Licensing Mystery

Order and simplification are the first step toward the mastery of a subject – the actual enemy is the unknown—Thomas Mann



In a time that now seems like a century ago but was really just three decades back, hunting western big game as a nonresident was a simple thing. All my buddies and I did was decide where we wanted to go hunt deer or elk, take up a collection for gas money, and a few days before the season opened drive east from Sacramento to Nevada, Idaho, or Colorado. Once in the state, we'd seek out a local sporting goods store, buy our licenses, tags, and a few supplies, and then head for the hills. The toughest part was coordinating our vacation schedules at work.

Those were the good old days, a simpler time before urban America sprawled out into prime foothill and mountain game habitat, when mule deer numbers were up and elk populations were just beginning to explode. Then, if you were hip, a southwestern Coues' deer tag was yours for the asking. Only locals were dialed into the tremendous challenge of hunting a mature Columbia blacktail buck, a Roosevelt's elk bull, or an eastern Montana whitetail. Hunting for "exotic" species like bighorn sheep, Shiras moose, and Rocky Mountain goats was just getting underway in the lower 48 states. If you wanted to really have an adventure, you loaded up and came north to Alaska, where unguided nonresidents could take a big bull moose, whopper caribou bull, or smoker mountain goat billy fairly easily. Game-rich public land areas were relatively uncrowded then, too. And if you had some manners, it wasn't all that uncommon to obtain permission to hunt private land with little more than a smile and a handshake.

Sadly, those days are, for the most part, gone forever. Today a more common scenario finds the unattached sportsman competing with hundreds of others on public lands. Today's hunters are better educated than those of yesterday, too, having learned much about the lives of the animals they hunt and how to best hunt them from a myriad of magazine articles, books, videos, and cable television shows. That makes it tougher for us "smart guys" to get away from the crowds and hunt tough-to-get-to places by ourselves anymore. And landowners are more likely to have leased their lands to outfitters who charge a premium for guided hunting, or the rancher is reserving his land for family and a few close friends. It's a different world, to be sure. And yet, for the enterprising sportsmen on a budget, there is still some excellent hunting to be had.

The rules have changed along with the times. For example, the days of buying a nonresident hunting license and deer or elk tag over the counter the day before the season opens officially ended in 1998. That was the final year Colorado, the last place sportsmen could buy licenses and deer tags over-the-counter with few restrictions, sold

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licenses this way. In 1999, Colorado joined all other western states in both limiting the number of overall big game tags they sell each year, and forcing nonresidents to apply for them well before the season begins.

Well, that's not exactly true. Wyoming, for example, usually has several left-over doe pronghorn tags they sell on a first-come, first-served basis once the drawing is completed. If you want to hunt bucks or bulls, though, you're going to have to work the system.

The system can be perplexing. Each state has their own game laws, season dates, bag limits, and so on, of course, as well as their own regulation booklets and application forms. Most are quite confusing, leaving many applicants wondering if they should call their lawyer before they fill out the paperwork. If you make a mistake, send in the wrong amount of money, or miss a deadline—each state's applications are due at widely different times—you'll be summarily rejected.

A Systematic Approach

To minimize the confusion and avoid missed deadlines, I use a systematic approach when applying for tags in the various states. Once you have your own system in place, it's easy to keep it working for you. Here's how I do it.

The process begins before Christmas, when I contact the game departments of the states I'm thinking about hunting the next year. I ask to be placed on the mailing list to receive the upcoming year's hunting regulations, special draw hunt application forms, and any booklets required to apply for the special hunts when they become available. Don't dawdle. Applications for some states are due as early as late January and early February. (See accompanying sidebar.) I have a state-by-state file system set up, into which I place all my research materials for each separate state. This includes regulations and application forms, as well as any other data I collect long the way—maps, magazine articles or other printed material discussing hunting in that state, notes from interviews with biologists and information sources like other hunters, and so on. I never throw out my research materials, by the way, but use each year's data as a building block for future hunt planning.

The Boone and Crockett Club's various records books are a great research source. (For bowhunters, it is the Pope and Young Club's records book that is the sa-

STATE GAME DEPARTMENTS

In addition to writing or calling individual game departments, you can also glean information from the websites of various states. Remember that application deadlines can change annually. As of press time, the 2004 application due dates had not been set. Most states follow the same basic dates each year. However, be sure to check early enough to make sure you don't miss a deadline, although for some states the deadline has already passed for 2004.

2004 Application Deadlines

Alaska Department of Fish & Game www.state.ak.us/adfg

P.O. Box 25526, Juneau, AK 99802 — (907) 465-4112

May 31 for all species except those listed below

November 1 through December 6, 2002 for Dall's sheep, Koyukuk moose, guided spring brown bear, mountain goat.

Arizona Game & Fish Department www.gf.state.az.us

2222 W. Greenway Rd., Phoenix, AZ 85023 n (602) 942-3000

June 10

California Department of Fish & Game, License & Revenue Branch

3211 S St., Sacramento, CA 95816 — 916/227-2177

June 4

Colorado Division of Wildlife www.wildlife.state.co.us

6060 Broadway, Denver, CO 80216 — 303/297-1192

April 1

Idaho Department of Fish & Game www.state.id.us/fishgame

P.O. Box 25, Boise, ID 83707 — (208) 334-3700

April 30 for sheep and Rocky Mountain goat

May 31 for deer, elk, and pronghorn

Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks . . . www.fwp.state.mt.us

1420 E. Sixth, Helena, MT 59620 — (406) 444-2535

March 15 for general deer and elk

May 1 for moose, sheep, and Rocky Mountain goat

June 1 for special deer, elk, and pronghorn

Nevada Department of Wildlife <http://ndow.org>

P.O. Box 10678, Reno, NV 89520 — (702) 688-1500

April 21

New Mexico Game & Fish Department . . . www.gmfsh.state.nm.us

State Capitol, Villagra Bldg, Santa Fe, NM 87503 — (505) 827-7882

April 26

Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife www.dfw.state.or.us

P.O. Box 59, Portland, OR 97207 — (503) 229-5400

May 15

Utah Wildlife Division www.wildlife.utah.gov

1596 W. North Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84116 — (801) 538-4700

January 31

Washington Department of Wildlife www.wa.gov/wdfw/

600 Capitol Way N., Olympia, WA 98501 — (206) 753-5700

June 22

Wyoming Game & Fish Department www.gf.state.wy.us

5400 Bishop Blvd., Cheyenne, WY 82202 — (307) 777-4597

January 31 for elk

February 28 for bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goat, and moose

March 15 for deer and pronghorn

cred source.) Boone and Crockett's new searchable database program is outstanding. Also, the Associates Online Community, found on the Club's website, has a "Hunting Reports Western States" section that is full of good stuff. All states have annual harvest information available, sometimes for free and sometimes for a few bucks, but regardless it can be very helpful. The point is that you can never have too much information when researching a new hunting area or place to apply for a tag.

In my computer I have a check list set up that shows each state and when applications for various hunts are due. I print this out and keep it posted in my office, and also write down application due dates on my desk calendar. When the time comes, I make sure I fill them out the applications and get them in on time with exactly the required amount of money. (If you draw, you receive the license and tag in the mail, and away you go. If you don't draw, the state refunds all application fees less a small processing fee.)

Special Draw Hunts

On top of all this, there is what we call the "special draw" or "limited entry" hunts. Virtually every state in the West offers several limited-entry hunts in which tag numbers are reduced and their issuance tightly controlled, one excellent way game is managed for relatively high buck-to-doe or bull-to-cow ratios. Often, but not always, these hunts restrict sportsmen to the harvest of only old, mature bucks and bulls. Conversely, some are the only way to harvest a cow elk for the freezer. And special draw hunts are the only way to draw the very few tags

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issued each year for the aforementioned "exotic" species like bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and Shiras moose. In many cases, special draw hunts place weapons restrictions on sportsmen, limiting them to using a muzzle-loader or archery tackle instead of a centerfire rifle.

Like just about every too-good-to-be-true deal in this world, it pays to read the fine print. In the case of the best special hunts, competition for available tags is fierce. For example, the odds of drawing a tag in most of the areas I apply for each year are no better than 3 to 1, and usually much worse. I apply for more than one hunt each year where the odds are less than one percent. These difficult odds keep many people from applying. That's fine with me, but I still don't understand their thinking. Applying for these tags is a no-lose situation. If you draw, you're off on a truly high-quality hunting adventure where hunter numbers are restricted and game densities high. If you don't, you can go hunting where you were originally going to go anyway.

In many cases, those who apply and do not draw a tag are given a "preference" or "bonus point" by the state. Preference points give preferential treatment in the drawings to those hunters who have applied for a certain type of hunt in previous years and not drawn a tag. In some cases you actually have to apply for several years before you're really in the game, thanks to the fact that there are more people with the maximum allowable number of preference points in the draw each year than there are tags available.

Some states also set aside a specific number of non-resident tags for sportsmen who agree to hunt with an outfitter. Montana, for example, sets aside a third of the available non-resident big-game combination licenses each year for outfitted hunters. Nearly half the available brown bear permits issued on Alaska's Kodiak Island are set aside for guided hunters.

Landowner Tags

In a move that is somewhat controversial, some states also issue landowners special "landowner tags" for deer and elk. The theory behind these tags is that, because a farmer or rancher owns the land upon which game may spend much of the year, and because these animals may inflict crop damage, the landowner is partially compensated by receiving tags good for the harvest of a set number of these animals each year.

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The formula at which this number of tags is determined still confuses me, and it is not the same everywhere, but it is often loosely based on the private acreage involved and the number of animals that use the land.

The landowner is free to do with these tags what he will. He can use one himself, give them to family and friends, or more commonly, sell them to the highest bidder. The highest bidder is often an outfitter who, in turn, supplies them to clients who did not draw a tag in the regular tag draw process. All states have a list of landowners who receive these tags, and many enterprising hunters spend a lot of long-distance money each year calling tag holders to see if they can purchase an available tag for themselves.

Landowner tags are attractive to serious trophy hunters in three ways. First, they are guaranteed: you do not have to draw a limited-entry tag to hunt the area. Second, they are limited to private land, meaning that access to other hunters will in all likelihood also be strictly controlled, giving you the chance of a high-quality hunt with little competition from others. And third, hunting seasons for landowner tags sometimes, but not always, fall outside the dates of general seasons. This can be a big advantage if they allow you to hunt during the rut when most others cannot.

Help From The States

To their credit, most western states, realizing that their application procedures can be quite confusing, have taken steps to help nonresidents with their paperwork. There is a lot of good information available on each game department's web site, for example. Many have information phone numbers staffed by friendly, helpful folks who can answer all your questions. Licenses and tags can now be ordered over the phone

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using a credit card in some states. The process is evolving, and it's getting better.

Avoiding The Pitfalls

Like finding other "honey holes" of good hunting, just because you are applying for a limited-entry tag in a specific state does not guarantee that unit or hunt will give you great odds at a buck or bull with huge antlers. Research is the key to finding such a spot. Just because a state is offering a limited-entry hunt for mule deer doesn't mean the area is overrun with 30-inch bucks. Not

all limited-entry hunts are created equal. A trophy hunter is best served by deciding that he wants to hunt trophy-class muleys, elk, or whatever, then apply for special hunts in areas of dif-

ferent states throughout the West that have a proven track record for producing these kinds of animals.

It is this type of research, in conjunction with the varying and complex application systems of the different states that keeps most people from applying. That problem was simplified a decade ago when well-known New Mexico outfitter George Taulman of United States Outfitters (1-800/845-9929) began his Professional Licensing Service. The program is not only inexpensive, it's a great way for the unattached sportsman who doesn't have the time needed to keep up with what's happening with both special tag draws and hunting prospects in a number of states.

United States Outfitters may have been first, but today there are several others that are excellent. One that has a strong and growing following is Garth Carter's Hunter Services (435/386-1020; 386-1090

fax; www.huntinfool.com). Carter is a former Utah state game biologist and a serious big game hunter. His service publishes a monthly newsletter filled with information on the very best western hunts for all big-game species, including those on both public and private land. Included are state-by-state updates, updates on trophy units, drawing odds for a large number of limited-entry hunts, harvest statistics, and more. Carter will also assist members with non-resident tag and license applications, has information on fee-based private land hunting and ranch leases, and also works with a handful of top-notch outfitters as a booking agent. At \$100 per year, membership is a great bargain.

KISS

It is this constant state of change, though, which makes it imperative that nonresidents stay on top of things. As Thomas Mann said, simplification is the key to mastering any subject. By following the age-old KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) system and creating a simple, orderly system of your own, you'll be less likely to mess up the application process and miss out on what very well could be the hunt of a lifetime. ■

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