

# Shoulder Season Basics

BY MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

What hunters and landowners need to know about FWP's unprecedented attempt to reduce extremely overabundant elk populations in 43 Montana hunting districts.



**GROWING PROBLEM** The combination of mild winters and private land “refuges” has allowed many elk herds to mushroom. In some areas, elk numbers are up to ten times greater than population “objectives” based on landowner, hunter, and other stakeholder concerns.

**I**n February 2016, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission authorized elk “shoulder seasons” in 43 Montana hunting districts, creating some of the longest elk hunting opportunities in state history. Here’s what hunters and landowners need to know about these extensions to Montana’s general firearms season.

**Q. What are shoulder seasons?**

**A.** They are firearms seasons outside the regular five-week general firearms elk season, mostly restricted to private land. Shoulder season dates differ by hunting district. This year some began as early as August 15 and others will continue until February 15, in some cases creating six full months of hunting opportunity (see page 33).

Depending on the specific hunting district, hunters can hunt during a shoulder

season using their general elk license or elk B license (the latter obtained through a limited drawing—the application deadline for which was June 1—or over the counter).

**Q. Why are shoulder seasons necessary?**

**A.** There are far too many elk in many parts of Montana. This has caused problems for landowners as overabundant elk knock down fences and consume haystack and pasture meant for livestock. Concentrated

elk also increase the risk of brucellosis spreading to cattle in areas where the disease is prevalent. In some hunting districts, elk numbers have grown to more than ten times higher than “objectives”—levels based on landowner tolerance, hunter interests, and other factors.

Shoulder seasons will help the agency comply with state statutes requiring it to manage elk populations to objectives. The seasons will also meet a mandate by Governor Steve Bullock for FWP to improve relationships among the department, landowners, and hunters.

**Q. How will shoulder seasons help reduce elk numbers?**

**A.** They will help by giving hunters more time to find and harvest cow elk, and by moving herds around the landscape before and after the general season—like in late August when elk often bunch up on irrigated

fields—making the animals more vulnerable to hunters.

The shoulder season harvest will add to, not replace, the general season harvest. Even with shoulder seasons, the harvest in targeted hunting districts must also increase during the general season to sufficiently reduce elk populations.

Also, shoulder seasons won’t work to reduce elk numbers unless landowners, hunters, and FWP employees work together.

**Q. Why don’t landowners just allow more public hunting access to reduce elk numbers?**

**A.** Many do. But often elk leave ranches that are open to hunting during the five-week season. The animals find refuge on nearby private lands that don’t allow public hunting. After the general season ends, elk then return and cause problems on ranches that had allowed public hunting.

**Q. Where will shoulder seasons occur?**

**A.** Most of the 43 hunting districts are in central, south-central, and southwestern Montana (see map and list on page 33). Those areas have exceptionally high elk numbers that FWP has been unable to reduce using other population management tools, such as allowing more B licenses during the regular five-week season.

**Q. What did FWP learn from the pilot shoulder season it set up last winter in four hunting districts?**

**A.** The department learned that shoulder seasons can work to increase harvest. For instance, in HD 449/452 and HD 446, hunters harvested more elk last season than in any previously recorded harvest there. The increase was almost entirely due to greater harvest of antlerless elk in both the general season and the pilot shoulder season.

The pilot showed that harvest was high-

est in hunting districts where landowners cooperated and hunters could use their general license. Success was lowest in those areas where hunters needed special licenses to hunt and landowners were less likely to allow public hunting.

FWP also learned that there was enormous interest from hunters. The FWP office at White Sulphur Springs, the nearest town for three of the four pilot hunting districts, received 20,000 phone calls and thousands of visits.

Though FWP staff there and elsewhere did their best to connect hunters with landowners willing to provide access, it still wasn’t easy to put the two together. Hunters participating in the 2016-17 shoulder seasons will need to develop relationships with landowners to secure permission, just as they do during the regular season.

Hunting during the pilot shoulder seasons was often hard due to cold and snow,





**MORE DAYS AFIELD** In addition to the goal of reducing elk numbers to lessen landowner depredation problems, shoulder seasons will provide hunters with additional weeks and even months to harvest a cow elk.

and most landowners allowed only non-motorized access and retrieval. Hunters expecting an “easy” hunt were disappointed, while those prepared to hike long distances in winter conditions had the highest success.

Initial participation among landowners was high, though having public hunters on their properties for ten additional weeks became a hardship for some. Hunters should do everything they can not to disrupt landowners’ operations. In addition to securing permission early, shoulder season hunters should follow property owners’ rules, hunt ethically, and show landowners they appreciate the additional hunting opportunity.

**Q. Are shoulder seasons like game damage and management season hunts, with hunter rosters?**

**A.** No. Game damage hunts and management seasons are used to reduce elk numbers on and disperse herds off *specific properties* that allow general season public hunting but still have severe depredation problems. Hunters who apply in lotteries to be on the rosters are notified at short notice when and where they can hunt.

Shoulder seasons, which do not have rosters, are meant to reduce elk numbers in *entire hunting districts*. Shoulder seasons are printed in the hunting regulations, allowing hunters to plan outings far in advance. Hunters will need to locate and gain permis-

sion from landowners beforehand, just as they do during the general season.

Another difference is that game damage and management season hunts are often relatively easy because landowners can direct hunters to concentrations of elk causing problems, often near roads. Hunting during shoulder seasons will be just as hard, or harder, than during the general season.

**Q. Will FWP help put hunters in touch with cooperating landowners?**

**A.** FWP has hired “elk hunt information coordinators” for Regions 2, 3, 4, and 5 to provide shoulder season information to hunters and landowners. Sometimes an elk hunt information coordinator will be able to connect hunters with landowners seeking help with elk reductions, but hunters should not count on that. Phone numbers for the coordinators are on the FWP website.

**Q. Don’t shoulder seasons allow some landowners to outfit for bulls and then use public hunters to come in later and reduce cow elk numbers?**

**A.** That’s an issue, even though most elk hunters are more than happy to harvest a cow elk. Still, to address concerns that shoulder seasons might be misused, FWP has made them “performance” based. This means that a shoulder season will continue in a hunting district only if more than half

the cow and bull elk harvest takes place during the regular archery and firearms seasons. This performance criterion is not directed at individual properties but rather across entire hunting districts. Those who have restricted public access during the general season and want to use the shoulder season for elk reductions will likely need to allow more access for both cow and bull elk during the general season to meet hunting district harvest goals. Landowners unwilling to do so could create more elk depredation and increase the likelihood of brucellosis on their own and their neighbors’ properties.

**Q. What should hunters expect if they hunt during a shoulder season?**

**A.** ▶ Expect it to be like the general season, though, in most cases, shoulder seasons will be on private land only.

▶ Don’t expect shoulder seasons to be like game damage hunts. There are no rosters or arranged landowner contacts.

▶ If hunting in winter, prepare for cold, difficult conditions. If hunting in an early shoulder season, prepare for hot weather.

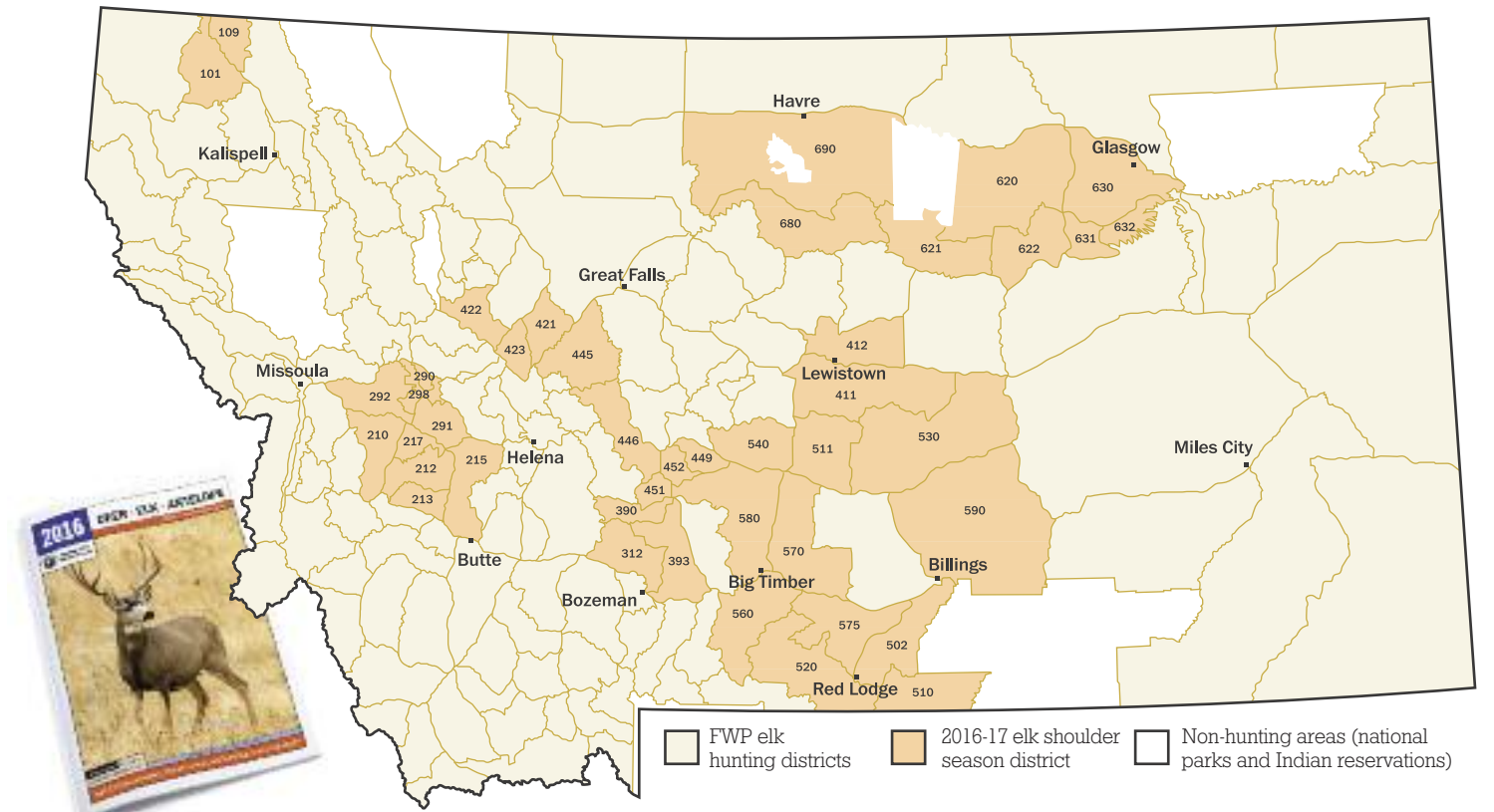
▶ Don’t expect to hunt on public land.

▶ Don’t expect to use motorized vehicles.

▶ Do expect to enjoy extra days afield hunting elk in Montana’s great outdoors.

For more information on shoulder seasons, visit [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). 🐾

## 2016-17 Elk Shoulder Seasons



Region	Valid in Hunting District(s)	License Type	Shoulder Season Dates
1	HD 101 and 109	B License by drawing only	Aug. 15–Oct. 16
	HD 210	B License by drawing only	Aug. 15–Jan. 1
2	HD 212 and 213	B License by drawing only	Dec. 1–Feb. 15
	HD 215	OTC (Over the Counter) B License	Aug. 15–Feb. 15
	HD 217	OTC B License, B License by drawing only, and General Elk License	Aug. 15–Feb. 15*
	HD 290 and 298	OTC B License	Aug. 15–Feb. 15
	HD 291	B License by drawing only	Aug. 15–Feb. 15
3	HD 292	B License by drawing only	Aug. 15–Oct. 21
	HD 312, 390, and 393	OTC B License	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Nov. 28–Jan. 1
4	HD 390 and 393	General Elk License	Nov. 28–Jan. 1
	HD 411 and 412	B License by drawing only and General Elk License	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Nov. 28–Jan. 15*
	HD 421	B License by drawing only	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Jan. 1–Feb. 15
5	HD 422 and 423	B License by drawing only	Jan. 1–Feb. 15
	HD 445, 446, 449, 451, and 452	B License by drawing only and General Elk License	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Oct. 17–21, Nov. 28–Feb. 15
6	All R5 except HD 500, 511, and 530	B License by drawing only and General Elk License	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Oct. 17–21, Nov. 28–Jan. 1*
	HD 511 and 530	B License by drawing only and General Elk License	Aug. 15–Sept. 2, Oct. 17–21, Nov. 28–Jan. 15*
6	HD 680 and 690	B License by drawing only	Dec. 15–31
	HD 620, 621, 622, 630, 631, and 632	B License by drawing only	Dec. 15–31

\*Some licenses are not valid in all hunting districts or for all shoulder seasons. See hunting regulations.