

WISCONSIN DNR NEWS

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This article is being written just after the closure of the Wisconsin 9-day gun deer season. Not all harvest figures have been compiled for the gun hunt. It does seem though, depending on where you hunted or when you hunted, it made all of the difference in determining whether you had a successful season or not. I can say as many others can, that once the snow arrived in the Northern Forest Deer management zone, the deer movement increased greatly. This also led to some hunters having difficulties moving around because of the amount of snow on the ground and or on the trees.

One hunting opportunity that many archers have forgotten about or did not know existed, is that an archer can hunt with archery equipment during the gun deer season. An archer can harvest an antlered deer with archery equipment and register that animal on his/her gun deer permit. This provision was passed a number of years ago by the legislature through a bill known as, The Lesser Weapons Bill. Yes, this does mean that in all regular deer management zones that have buck harvest permits available an archer can legally harvest two bucks with archery equipment. This is allowed as long as they have a valid archery and gun harvest permit. The only stipulation a bowhunter faces during this time, is that they must follow the Wisconsin blaze orange requirements while hunting.

Seeing as I already started talking about archery deer hunting, I will continue on that subject. According to DNR reports, hunter success depended on the temperature, the winds, or other outdoor factors. These all factored together and would dictate what if any deer were seen on each outing. Deer movement in northern Wisconsin during the rut was slow to minimal until we received a small amount of snow and much cooler temperatures. Harvest figures show that antlered deer harvest in the north was slightly down, while the rest of the state was around average. Antlerless harvest statewide was just a little above average. There still are a good number of days in which you can be outdoors and try to fill your archery harvest permit; get out and enjoy God's Great Outdoors. In the past week I have also heard of a few decent sized bucks that have already started to lose their antlers. These bucks were probably rutting heavy and are trying to conserve energy going into this upcoming winter.

The turkey harvest this past spring was fairly normal with some good-sized birds harvested both in weight and beard lengths. The DNR's turkey committee met last week to discuss the spring harvest numbers, poult/hen numbers and also the preliminary fall harvest figures. The annual turkey hunter survey showed that a large majority of hunters who returned the survey are very happy with the season framework that the state has been using for the past several years. Whether it be the 6 time periods, the start of the first season date, or whether they had an undisturbed quality hunt, the majority of hunters were satisfied with the way season is run. The committee then moved onto setting the proposed harvest quotas and permits for the 2026 Spring Turkey seasons. The recommendation for Turkey Management Zones (TMZ) 1 thru 4 will be to have a fair increase in the number of

harvest permits available this year. TMZ 5 has a proposed slight increase in harvest permits, while TMZ's 6 and 7 had a little more discussion about quotas with some committee members wanting to greatly increase harvest permits for the upcoming season; to better match hunter interests and demands. While these zones could manage some increase to the harvest, these zones are also very susceptible to severe winter conditions. The committee finally came to the consensus to slightly raise harvest permit levels in case of a harsh winter in 2026 followed by an excellent spring harvest. If this were to occur, then in 2027 the committee would be forced to greatly decrease permit and harvest levels. This recommendation is being sent by the turkey committee to the DNR Policy Team and the NRB and will need their approval for these changes to occur. Also, the fall season in these two zones, starting in 2026, will run concurrently with the other TMZ's in the state for the first time. This was another consideration the committee had to think of as well.

Moving on, now let us talk about URSSUS AMERICANAUS or as us hunters call them Black Bears. This past bear harvest season was good in certain Bear Management Zones (BMZ) and not as good in others. Each one of the BMZ's have specific harvest quotas, and depending on weather conditions and available natural foods, the success rates can change from year to year. Starting with BMZ A, the bear harvest success rates were very good, with the proposed harvest quota actually being exceeded. In Zones B and C, the harvest was down slightly, falling below the predicted harvest. BMZ D, "the trouble zone," was also below predicted harvest goals. The reason why BMZ D is called "the trouble zone," is because it has some of the highest damage complaints in the state. BMZ's E&F were way under harvest goals. These two zones do not have a decent amount of good bear habitat and are not conducive to as high of a hunting success rate as is seen in the northern four BMZs.

Bear hunting harvest goals and harvest permits are set by combining the previous 3-year success rates, age data, estimated populations levels, nuisance complaints, and damage complaints. The Bear Committee thoroughly discusses each BMZ using these numbers along with input from the DNR and other outside user groups. For the upcoming (2026) bear harvest season you will see that for BMZ A the harvest permits will be very close to the same as last year. BMZ's B, C, and D have a proposal to slightly increase both the quota and harvest permits. In BMZ's E & F, the committee is proposing a decent increase in permit levels. This will more closely match the demand for permits and is also due to the very low success rates in these two zones. Part of the problem faced in these two zones is that major portions of the land in these zones is privately owned, with many landowners not allowing other people to hunt their land. Other factors contributing to the low success rates in these two zones include habitat that is not the greatest and the bears in these zones tend to migrate from one food source to another from day to the next. Overall, the total harvest quota and harvest permits available for 2026 will be up a fair amount from 2025.

The elk committee meeting does not happen until next week, so I can only give a small outlook into what the elk season has produced so far, and what the 2026 elk hunting season may have for harvest permits. At this time, the harvest season has been fairly

successful in both Elk Management Zones (EMZ). In 2025 no successful harvest permit holder indicated that they would be hunting with archery equipment.

While having a discussion with the Northern Elk manager, he reminded me that in 2026 for the first time ever, Wisconsin will have Elk Hunting Zones, (EHZ). So, in 2026, when applying for an elk preference point and or an elk harvest permit, you will have to pick an EHZ. If drawn, you will have to hunt in that particular EHZ and nowhere else. This new system will make it possible for the state to more closely regulate where elk are harvested. In previous seasons, the majority of the elk have been harvested in a couple of core areas, which may eventually affect the rate that elk may more rapidly propagate. One thing to remember is that over the past number of seasons the success rate for elk hunters in Wisconsin has been close to 100%. The Native Americans success rate runs just slightly lower. I really do not know what to expect as far as what harvest goals or permits will look like in 2026. I really DON" T KNOW and I really do not want to guess. They may be close to 2025's but split into the different EHZ's.

I pray that you all will continue to enjoy God's Great Outdoors and get to feast on the bounty provided to us through the many animals we have the opportunity to hunt and harvest.