

2021 – 2022 NEW MEXICO DEER HUNTING PROSPECTS

DEER HUNTING OVERVIEW

Whether you define quality deer hunting as having the opportunity to see a lot of deer, or having the opportunity to harvest an older deer with significant antler mass, deer hunting in New Mexico will offer something for you.

The Land of Enchantment offers ample opportunities for hunters to pursue deer. From the Alpine areas of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range to the desert floors in southwestern New Mexico, hunters can experience a variety of habitats.

Approximately 36,000 sportspersons hunt deer in New Mexico annually, with approximately 11,000 deer harvested. Mule deer comprise 95% of the deer harvest, but New Mexico also offers unique opportunities to hunt both Coues and Texas white-tailed deer. Except for in a few specific instances, does are not able to be harvested.

License and Hunt Types

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (Department) offers both public draw licenses and private-land only licenses. Licenses issued through the public draw are valid on legally accessible public land and private land with written permission in the Game Management Unit (GMU) for which the license is issued. Private-land only licenses are only valid on private properties with



written permission in the GMU and for the dates specified on the license. Most private-land only licenses are available over the counter from any license vendor.

The Department also restricts weapon types during the season, offering rifle, muzzleloader or archery hunting options through standard and quality hunt types.

SURVEYS AND POPULATION TRENDS

Deer populations naturally fluctuate between high and low densities over time, and fluctuations can be dramatic. Deer population growth or decline is largely driven by adult female and fawn survival, and changes in these rates can cause populations to fluctuate. Weather, disease, predation and human induced mortality impact adult female and fawn survival; however, availability of quality forbs, shrubs, and concealment cover can lessen or intensify the effect of these individual factors. For more information on issues impacting mule deer populations, visit

https://www.wafwa.org/committees_groups/mule_deer_working_group/publications/.



Photo by D. Peoble

Poor conditions for deer population growth in the early-2000s resulted in suppressed deer numbers in several parts of the state. However, improved conditions in recent years have led to increased fawn recruitment and female survival. As a result, deer populations in New Mexico are stable, with most herds experiencing population growth.

The Department conducts post-hunt, aerial surveys to determine buck to doe (B:D) and fawn to doe (F:D) ratios each winter and to monitor overall population trends. The long-term statewide averages are 39 fawns:100 does and 35 bucks:100 does which are within the Department's management objectives. These ratios and trends indicate that the statewide population is stable in most areas with some local variation in population trajectories.

In general, deer herds in northern New Mexico are healthy with some populations experiencing rapid growth.

Although deer populations in southern New Mexico are lower than historical data suggests, F:D and B:D ratios have been improving over

recent years. Populations in southern New Mexico are stable with some local populations seeing significant increases.

LANDOWNERSHIP

Approximately eleven percent of the land mass in New Mexico is tribally owned. Of the remaining land mass, approximately 50% is public land while the other 50% is privately owned. Public lands available to hunt deer in New Mexico include state owned and managed properties to federally owned and managed (Figure 1). Each jurisdiction has different rules for access and recreation on their properties.

Additional information about rules for each landownership type can be found on the [Department's website](#) or by accessing the links below.

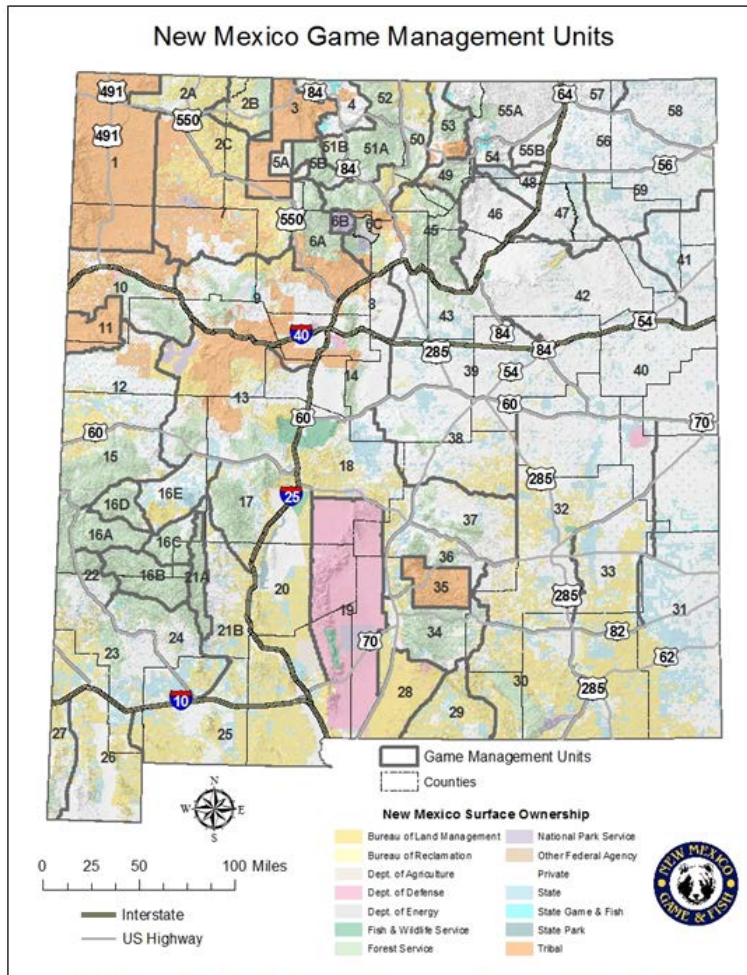


Figure 1. Map of Department GMUs and New Mexico surface ownership.

For more information on Federally Owned Property

Bureau of Land Management

<https://www.blm.gov/node/7050>

US Forest Service

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r3>

US Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System

<https://www.fws.gov/refuges/refugelocatomaps/NewMexico.html>

For more information on State owned lands

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Wildlife Management Areas

<http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/conservation/state-game-commission-lands/>

New Mexico State Land Office

<http://www.nmstatelands.org/hunting-access-info.aspx>

HUNTING PROSPECTS

New Mexico is known for its mule deer hunting, and it is a destination for both residents and non-residents who wish to harvest a high-quality mule deer buck. New Mexico has two subspecies of mule deer, Rocky Mountain mule deer and desert mule deer. In general, Rocky Mountain mule deer inhabit areas north of Interstate 40, while desert mule deer are found south of Interstate 40 (Figure 1).

In addition to mule deer, New Mexico has two subspecies of white-tailed deer, Coues white-tailed deer (also known in hunting circles as the “gray ghost of the desert”) and Texas white-tailed deer. Southwestern New Mexico is known for its Coues white-tailed deer hunting opportunities. Coues white-tailed deer are found throughout most GMUs in the Southwest portions of the state (Figure 2). Texas white-tailed deer can be found in pockets in the eastern portion of New Mexico from the Texas to Colorado borders as well as in the Sacramento Mountains (Figure 3). Some Texas white-tailed deer have also been observed in the Sandia and Manzano Mountains in recent years.

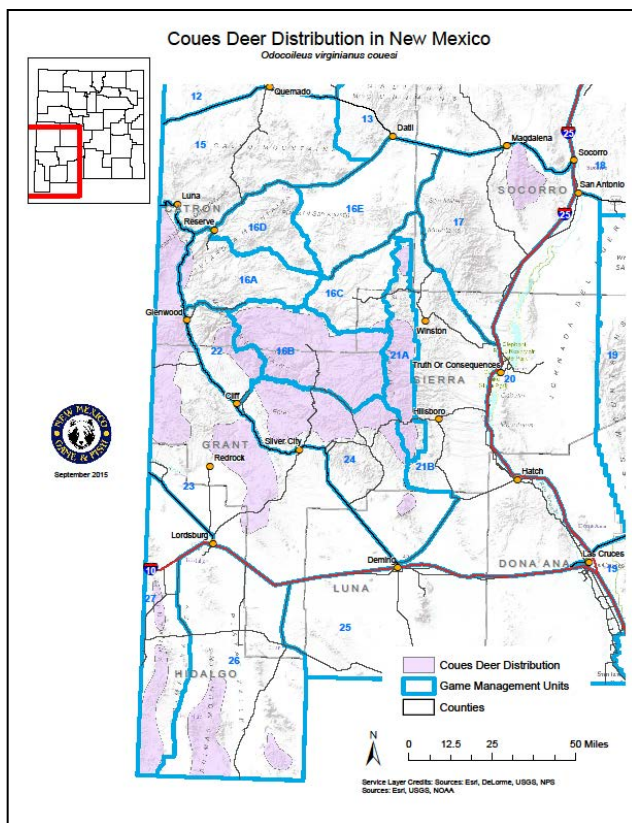


Figure 2. Coues white-tailed deer distribution in New Mexico.

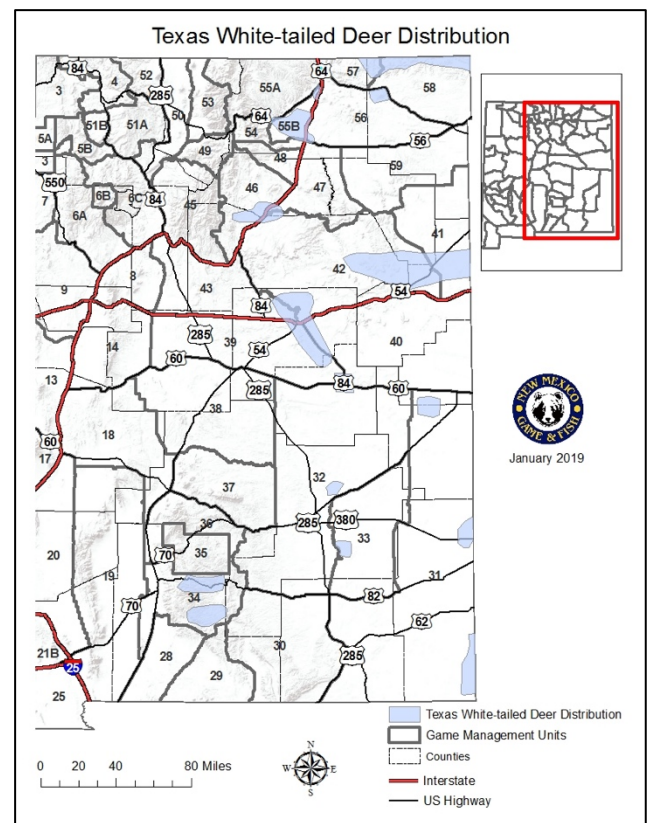


Figure 3. Texas white-tailed deer distribution in New Mexico.

Opportunity vs Quality

The Department manages deer hunting for both “opportunity” and “quality”, depending on the area. The hunt designation is listed in the Big Game Rule and Information Booklet under the “Fee Type” for each listed hunt.

- Standard hunts (also thought of as opportunity hunts) are managed to maximize annual hunter opportunity without negative impacts to overall population health. These hunts typically provide applicants with a higher chance of drawing a deer hunting license, but typically there is a higher number of hunters in the area and success rates may be lower as a result. The average age of harvested bucks in standard units is typically younger than that found in quality units.
- Quality hunts are designed to provide hunters with some combination of lower hunter density, an increased opportunity for success and an ability to choose from a wider selection of legal animals. Quality hunts also may offer season structures with varying timing and length that may provide longer hunts that are closer to the rut. Draw odds in quality hunts are typically lower, but success rates are generally higher for those that draw a tag. In addition, the average age of harvested bucks is generally greater than those harvested in standard units.



Regardless of area, weapon, or species hunted the harvest success rate for all deer hunts in New Mexico is approximately 35%. This success rate rivals that in other well-known deer hunting states in the west.

Opportunity Hunting Areas

GMUs 2B, 21, 23, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36 and 37 consistently have the highest deer harvest and many hunters successfully harvest bucks from these units annually. Areas with the highest deer densities and greater potential to harvest any legal buck can be found in the GMUs that are on the northern border of New Mexico as well as the Sacramento Mountains and the Guadalupe Mountains in the southeastern part of the state. Despite being managed for “opportunity”, older age class bucks can certainly be found in these GMUs by hunters willing to put in some extra work.

Quality Hunting Areas

GMUs 2C, 4, 5B, 6A/6C, 31, 33 and 45 regularly produce mule deer that make the Boone and Crockett (B&C) record book. In addition, several mule deer bucks meeting the B&C minimum have been taken in GMUs 13, 14 and 17 in recent years.

Most large mule deer bucks are consistently harvested in the northwestern portion of the state each year. In fact, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico has the most mule deer entries in the B&C record book of any other county in North America. The sand hill country in eastern New Mexico also regularly produces bucks that make the B&C record book.



Photo by T. Mitchusson

Hunters wanting to harvest a B&C Coues white-tailed buck should consider GMUs 23, 24 and 27. These units have produced record book Coues bucks over the years.

Habitat and Terrain

The diverse terrain found in New Mexico offers a variety of deer hunting experiences. The list of habitats and GMUs below is not comprehensive but it gives hunters a general idea of what type of hunting can be found across New Mexico.

Mountains and Alpine (GMUs 6A/6C, 8, 14, 16, 17, 34, 36, 37, 45, 49, 51A/B, 52, 53, 55A):

These units offer a variety of hunting experiences that can be tailored to your specific hunting style. Hunters can glass from ridges or roads, stalk through timber, sit on trails and water sources, or stalk bedded bucks in an alpine environment. A network of forest service roads provide access to hunters wishing to conduct day trips near their camps or vehicles, while those looking to get away from the crowds can backpack in or set up spike camps in the backcountry.

Hunters can find deer from the lower mountain valleys to Wheeler Peak, the highest peak in New Mexico which stands at 13,161'. These GMUs are characterized by mountainous terrain containing dark conifer and aspen forests with pockets of open meadows and mountain shrubs. Hunters wishing to hunt deer specifically in alpine environments should consider GMUs 45, 49 and 53 while the remaining units offer deer hunting opportunities in a mountain environment below timberline. Deer in mountain habitats may migrate to lower elevations when winter snowpack becomes too deep to access food resources.



Photo by O. Duvuvuei

Forest Service land dominates these GMUs and access can be gained through their network of roads and trails (see link above). Hunting can be challenging at times due to some rugged terrain that may require long, steep hikes, but success rates are high and mature bucks are taken in these units each year.

Plains and Rolling Hills (GMUs 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 47, 56, and 59):

The eastern portion of the state where these GMUs are found is dominated by plains and rolling hills with some canyons, escarpments, and sky island mountains in isolated areas. Shrublands, coulees and low conifer forests can be found where these breaks in the plains occur, and are often good deer habitat. To effectively hunt these GMUs, hunters may spend several hours glassing the habitat before stalking within shooting distance. Successful hunters are effective at spotting deer that are hidden in plain sight and using the wrinkles in terrain to conceal their movements across the open habitat.

Publicly accessible land is checkerboarded throughout these GMUs, and it is managed by the State Land Office (see link above) with the exception the Gallinas mountains in GMU 38 which is primarily forest service property. Extensive hiking opportunities are not typically available; however, hunters can day hike from their vehicles to glass the terrain and stalk through the various tracts of public land. Access to these tracts is gained through publicly maintained roads. Because the terrain is generally gentler, hunting may not be as physically demanding as in other habitats.

Since the terrain is more open, there is potential to see lots of deer in pockets in these units, and some large bucks can be found. Success rates in these GMUs can be high for rifle hunters but getting within bow range across the open habitat can be challenging. However, archery hunters find success in these units each year.

GMUs 56 and 59 have a network of mesas and volcanic cones that are separated by expanses of plains and grasslands. Public hunting in these units is available through the interspersed patches of State Land Office property. Although this area isn't known for its large bucks, deer densities are good and hunters can find good success in these units.

Sand Hill Country (GMUs 31, 32, and 33):

The sand hill country of eastern New Mexico is often overlooked by hunters seeking areas with good deer numbers and bucks with large antlers. Although this area isn't the first place that hunters think about when looking for a record buck in New Mexico, mature bucks are regularly harvested in this area. Deer antler growth is fueled by the shinnery oak and other nutritious forbs and shrubs found in this habitat, while the abundance of cover allows for increased fawn survival and recruitment.

Similar to the rolling hills and plains, hunters should plan to glass over large areas devoid of trees and plan their stalks using the rolling terrain to conceal their movement. Hunters in the sand hill country may not see as many deer as they might in the northwestern part of the state, and they may have to spend several hours glassing and hiking. However, deer are plentiful and an abundance of bucks are available to be harvested, some of

which can qualify for the record books. State Land Office property and BLM land is checkerboarded in these GMUs and access is gained through the publicly maintained roads (see links above). Although these units have some large tracts of public land, backpacking opportunities are limited and day hikes from camp or the vehicle are the most common type of hunting.

While GMUs 31 and 32 are managed for opportunity, GMU 33 is considered a quality unit, and success rates in each of these GMUs are high. Depending on the hunter's desire, they can harvest the first legal buck to fill the freezer or hold out for a mature buck which can be found throughout the sand hill country.

Canyons, Mesas, and Rimrock (GMUs 2A, 2B, 2C, 57, and 58):

The northwestern and northeastern portions of New Mexico are characterized by canyons, mesas and rimrock. This habitat allows for all methods of deer hunting. Hunters can glass large expanses of habitat from a single vantage point or they can hike the many wooded draws, mountains and rimrock in search of a buck to take home.



GMUs 2A, 2B and 2C in the northwest are dominated by sagebrush mesas with pinyon and juniper along the mesa edges and throughout the canyons. These mesas and canyons give way to higher elevation mountains to the East. Landownership and hunting access in the Northwest is predominately federal land owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS; see links above). The deer herd in these GMUs

is largely migratory; they migrate 40-70 miles from the high summer range of the San Juan Mountains in Colorado to winter in the Rosa area near Farmington. The migration starts in the middle of October each year regardless of snowpack, and the deer arrive on the winter range in NM within ~14 days. Deer hunting licenses in GMUs 2B and 2C are highly sought after by hunters looking to fill their freezer or take a B&C buck; several big bucks are harvested in these GMUs each year.

GMUs 57 and 58 have a network of mesas, coulees and volcanic cones. The slopes and coulees are dominated by scrub oak and pinyon-juniper woodlands while the mesa tops are predominately grasslands. Public land hunting opportunities is available on checkerboarded State Land Office properties.

Desert Habitat (GMUs 18, 20, 21B, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and portions of 31 and 32):

Most GMUs in the southern portion of the state are characterized by desert habitat with some river bottoms and drainages interspersed throughout. Deer densities can be sporadic in desert habitats, but good numbers can be found in pockets throughout these

units. Deer densities and population trends in desert habitats are largely influenced by the timing and amount of rainfall. In dry years, deer will typically be within 1.5 miles of water sources in desert habitats.

These units have an expansive network of public land ranging from BLM, USFS and State Land Office properties (see links above). Access to these public lands is gained through publicly maintained roads and the system of BLM and USFS roads.

The desert habitat in New Mexico provides a great opportunity for hunters to fill the freezer with a legal buck, but they aren't known for regularly producing record book mule deer bucks. Despite this, a few hunters take home mature mule deer every year. To locate deer in this country, hunters find it best to sit at a vantage point and glass the open terrain and shrubby draws. Once a buck is spotted, hunters will use the wrinkles in the landscape to hide their movements and get in shooting range. Some hunters, however, prefer to sit near water sources and wait for the bucks to come in for a drink.



What to expect for the 2021-2022 season

The last few years have been dry throughout much of New Mexico which has resulted in slightly lower fawn recruitment. Despite the drought conditions, adult buck and doe survival remains consistent and harvest success rates are steady. Deer numbers are stable but average throughout much of the state. As such, hunters will not likely see a

noticeable increase in deer populations or observations during their hunts. However, an abundance of bucks remain on the landscape and will be available for harvest.

If you have any questions about applying for a New Mexico hunt, you can contact the information center toll free at 1-888-248-6866.

The next Deer Rule will open in 2022, and the Department encourages our constituents to remain engaged in the rule development process by submitting official comments.