

Big game hunting is relatively new

Big game hunting in Kansas is a relatively new heritage because nearly all big game species were extirpated from the state by 1900.

Prior to settlement, the prairies of Kansas were home to tremendous herds of bison, elk, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope. In the timbered areas of eastern Kansas, white-tailed deer were abundant.

The first modern deer season was held in 1965, and permits were limited. Today, white-tailed deer thrive statewide and permits for residents are sold across the counter.

Mule deer are still common in western Kansas, through permits to hunt them are limited. Pronghorn antelope are limited to far-western counties where large areas of native prairie are still found, and residents can hunt them if they

receive a coveted permit in the annual drawing. Similarly, elk are hunted through very limited permits. The only free-ranging elk herd in Kansas is found on the Fort Riley Military Reservation in Riley County. Hunters can receive a Kansas Trophy Certificate if the antlers or horns from a deer or antelope they kill achieves a minimum score. The department also maintains an unofficial Top 20 list for deer and antelope.

Deer

Two deer species thrive in Kansas: the mule deer and the white-tailed deer.

Mule deer are restricted to the western one-third of the state, primarily on the High Plains, Smoky Hills, and Red Hills regions. As you travel west to east, mule deer are less abun-

dant, and whitetail numbers increase.

Whitetailed deer numbers have increased dramatically in the last 20 years, and they can be found virtually statewide wherever suitable habitat exists. Highest whitetail densities are in the eastern one-third of the state. Whitetails have adapted well to Kansas' modern landscape, finding cover in natural woodlands, shelterbelts, old homesteads and grasslands, and abundant food in cropfields. The selective management program has created a healthy deer herd, with excellent potential for trophy-sized bucks in all regions.

Antelope

The antelope, or more accurately, the pronghorn, is a unique species to North America. Historically pronghorn ranged throughout the western three-fourths of Kansas and were considered nearly as numerous as bison. But by the late 1800s and early 1900s, unregulated harvest reduced pronghorn to the western border of the state. Trap and transplant efforts were initiated in 1964 in Wallace and Sherman counties. Later (1978-1983) pronghorn were reintroduced into Barber, Comanche, Ellsworth, Saline, Gove, and Morton counties. A Flint Hills population of pronghorns was also established in Chase County with releases in 1978 1979, 1991 and 1992.

The western Kansas reintroductions were successful. There are about 2,000 pronghorn in the westernmost two to three tiers of counties. A few pronghorn roam Barber County, and 50 or so remain in the Flint Hills, which was the eastern edge of the historic pronghorn range in the U.S. None remain in Ellsworth and Saline counties.

As the landscape becomes more intensely developed and modified, it becomes more and more difficult to find space for larger animals like pronghorn, and landscape changes such as the loss of native prairie (to agriculture, urbanization, and tree growth resulting from fire suppression) have not been favorable for pronghorn. As a result, the amount of good pronghorn habitat is limited in Kansas, and even areas with extensive native grassland like the Flint Hills and parts of central Kan-

sas that might appear to be suitable for pronghorn aren't, as evidenced by the disappearance of reintroduced animals. There is a healthy population of pronghorn in Kansas, but they are and will likely continue to be restricted to the west.

The first hunting season was conducted in 1974. Nearly 500 hunters applied for the 80 permits available. Seventy pronghorns were harvested. Today, hunting is restricted in three management units that include parts or all of Sherman, Thomas, Wallace, Logan, Gove, Trego, Greeley, Wichita, Scott, Lane, Ness, Hamilton, Kearny, Finney, Gray, Hodgeman, Ford, Stanton, Grant, Haskell, Morton, Stevens, Seward, Meade and Clark counties. Firearms and muzzleloader permits are limited to residents only, and about 130 permits are authorized each year. More than 1,000 applications are received, and hunters who are unsuccessful in the drawing receive a preference point. It currently requires six preference points for a general resident to draw a permit. Archery hunters can purchase pronghorn permits over the counter and just more than 100 are sold each year.

Elk

Elk were another big game species that were common in pre-settlement Kansas. They were also extirpated at the turn of the century. However, a small herd was maintained at the Maxwell Wildlife Area near McPherson. The 2,200-acre enclosure is operated as a refuge and also features bison. In 1981, elk from Maxwell were released at the Cimarron National Grassland, and that herd was free-ranging. To keep that herd from growing too big and causing crop damage, a limited resident-only season was opened in 1987. Later in the 1980s, elk were captured at Maxwell and released on the Ft. Riley Military Reservation. That herd is also free-ranging, and a season was established for the fort in 1990. Today, elk are only hunted on and around Ft. Riley. More than 1,500 applications are received for the 20 or so permits allotted each year, and they are divided among military personnel and Kansas residents.

Deer check stations are available throughout area

By Carolyn Plotts

Deer permits are required for all hunting seasons, but in Kansas only deer taken during firearms season, which runs Nov. 30 - Dec. 11, must be examined at a deer check station.

"We do this primarily to continue checking the health of Kansas herds," said Dick Kelly, wildlife conservation officer in Oberlin for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.

Officer Kelly is stationed in Oberlin but serves Decatur and Rawlins counties and half of Norton. He also works in Phillips County.

The law requires hunters to take their deer to a check station within 48 hours after they kill their one, he said. Data will be collected from the hunter and a seal will be attached to the deer. Department personnel stop by these checkpoints to collect biological information from the deer.

Some the information they gather has to do with chronic wasting disease, a health concern for deer and elk. It is transmissible, affecting the brain, and inevitably causing death. It is a brain-wasting disease similar to "mad cow" disease.

An infected animal may become shabby, stand with drooping ears, appear to be in a stupor and even act unconcerned when hunters approach.

Even though, there is no known link between the disease and humans, hunters should practice common-sense safety precautions, biologists say. They should avoid eating any deer that appears ill. The *Kansas Hunting and Furharvesting Regulations Summary for 2005* advises that certain parts of the animal such as the brain, spinal cord, lymph nodes, eyes and tonsils should no be included with meat for people to eat.

Check stations were created so large numbers of deer could be examined and samples

obtained to monitor the health of Kansas' deer herds, the department says.

There has been only one animal, out of 5,700 deer and elk tested since 1996, that was positive for chronic wasting disease. That test was from a game farm elk that had been transferred from Colorado. No native Kansas deer has tested positive.

The counties of Kansas are divided into 18 areas, each under the jurisdiction of a conservation officer. The counties of northwest Kansas fall into areas 1, 2 and 3.

Bruce Reeves, manager of the Phillips 66 station in Norton said his check station saw 250-300 deer last year. He said a metal locking tag, similar to those seen on the back of semi-trailers, is attached to the deer to show that it has been inspected and that it was legally obtained.

Scott Carlson, owner of Northwest Arms and Service in Atwood, said he expects a busy deer season.

"People are saying they're seeing lots of deer and pheasants," he said. "Last year, we checked in over 170 deer, and I expect this year to be about that."

Area check stations include:

- Atwood, Northwest Arms and Services.
- Colby, Bud VanHorn, 895 W. Seventh St.
- Goodland, Bob's Wildlife Taxidermy.
- Hill City, J & M Taxidermy.
- Hoxie, Bainter Oil.
- Kensington, Tipi Taxidermy.
- Logan, Logan Hardware.
- Norton, Phillips 66.
- Oakley, Oakley Premium Meats
- Oberlin, Dales Fish 'n' Fun.
- Phillipsburg, Phillipsburg Locker Plant.
- Sharon Springs, Fox Still, 421 Elm St.
- St. Francis, Cheyenne County Wildlife, Inc..
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