

CHOCTAW NATION

2023-2024 BIG GAME HARVEST REPORT





Choctaw Nation
**Wildlife
Conservation**



Spring brings about a time of reflection for big game hunters in the Choctaw Nation. Deer season closed on January 15 and the realization that deer season is over hits home. Hunters can now look back on a successful season in the books. It is a great time to scout for the next season, maintain hunting equipment, and perhaps do a few habitat improvement projects. For those that maybe let the big one get away, it is a time for practice and perfecting your skills.

Much is the same for wildlife professionals once the seasons end. As harvest numbers pour in, our biologists analyze harvest statistics and use that information to make management decisions that potentially affect seasons, regulations, and bag limits. Big game populations in the Choctaw Nation are vitally important on many levels. They provide a tremendous source of clean, healthy protein. Family traditions that revolve around deer season are a large part of the culture we love. Tourism is boosted dramatically in fall months as hunters pursue Choctaw Nation whitetails from all areas of the country. The Choctaw Nation Department of Wildlife Conservation (CNDWC) works hard to make sure that we protect this resource and those who pursue it.

The 2023-2024 Fall hunting season marked our second year in which Choctaw Tribal Members were regulated by the Choctaw Tribal Code 110: Fish, Game, and Animals Code. CNO Tribal members hunting or fishing within the Choctaw Nation reservation are required to carry proof of tribal membership which serves as their hunting and fishing licenses. Choctaw Tribal Members are required to register/check deer, turkey, elk, bear, alligator gar, and paddlefish through the Chahta Achvffa membership portal.

The following is a brief report on big game for the 2023-24 seasons. We have compiled this information from harvest reports, hunter observations, and CNDWC data collections and observations in the field. By reporting harvests to Chahta Achvffa, Choctaw Nation biologists can better protect our wildlife, and our members natural right to hunt and fish. When you check your game or fish through the Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department, you are not only following the law, but you are also protecting tribal sovereignty and the game species native to the Choctaw Nation reservation.

The Choctaw Nation Wildlife Department wants to hear from you. Please contact us with concerns, questions, and observations. You can contact us by email at wildlife@choctawnation.com or by phone at 800-522-6170.

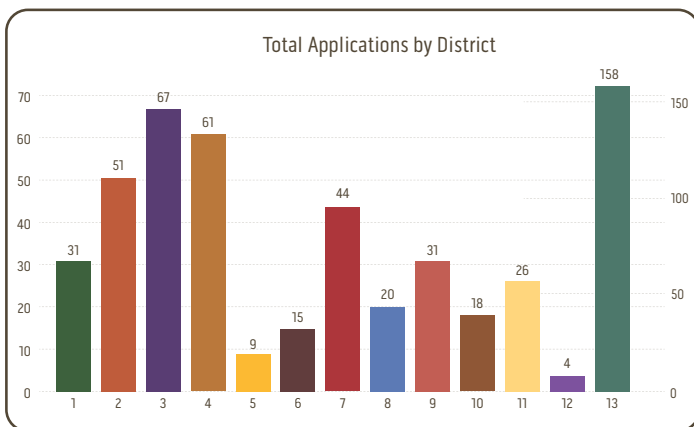


BLACK BEAR SEASON

Black bears were once an uncommon sight in the Choctaw Nation after their extirpation from the area. Over-exploitation, market hunting, and an unwarranted fear of the large animals lead to unregulated hunting and harvest. Due to the efforts of conservationists, hunters, and wildlife professionals, black bears are now a common occurrence in the Choctaw Nation. Southeast Oklahoma is home to a healthy, growing population of bears. Black bears are now plentiful. To manage the population a hunting season was instituted in 2009 by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC). The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma held its first regulated bear hunt in the fall of 2022.

Biologists from the Choctaw Nation and the ODWC collaborate to share survey data, harvest statistics, and research results to ensure that a healthy population continues to thrive. Biologists and game wardens are out in the field to collect biological data from each harvested bear. This information gives us insights into the populations with information such as ages, condition, and size. Harvest data, research, and field surveys all go into setting up season dates and bag limits.

The second Choctaw Nation bear archery season began on October 1, 2023 and ran through October 15, 2023. Muzzleloader season began on October 28, 2023



District 13 represents anyone who lives outside of the Choctaw Reservation

and ran through November 5, 2023. Archery season did not have a quota, but the muzzleloader season had a 20 bear quota that was shared with ODWC. CNDWC staff maintained communication with ODWC biologists to make sure the harvest was kept in check.

Drought conditions that plagued the region during summer and fall of 2022 eased up during 2023. Summer months were green and food was abundant compared to 2022. Early fall was met with some dry conditions in the Reservation but luckily these dry conditions did not affect mast production in most areas. Persimmons, muscadine grapes, sumac, and pawpaws provided fruit during 2023. The acorn crop in many areas was outstanding. While some bears left the bait piles to pursue acorns, many were still visiting bait as acorns held on longer than usual before falling.

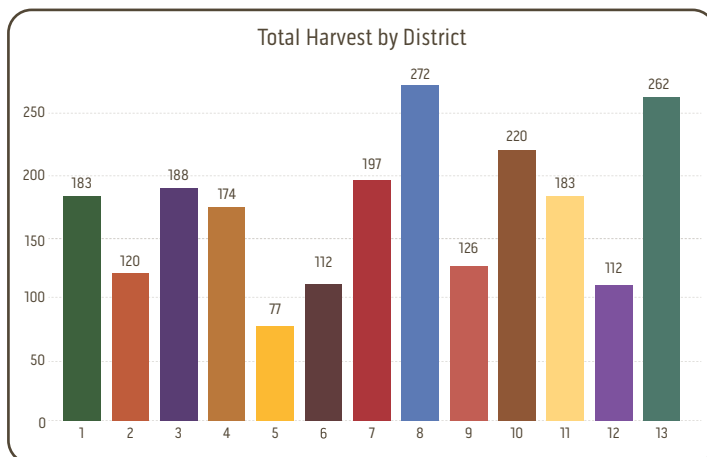
A total of 10 bears were harvested during the 2023 archery season by Choctaw members. No muzzleloader harvests were reported. There were 6 female bears and 4 male bears harvested. None of the 6 females were with cubs or lactating.

Choctaw hunters were required to watch a bear conservation video on the Chahta Achvffa portal before being issued a free bear permit. 535 bear permits were issued by the Choctaw Nation Wildlife Conservation Department in 2023 compared to the 1,123 during the 2022 season. This equates to a 52.3% decrease of permits issued. Hunters were required to obtain their permits before the October 1 season opener. Hunters could obtain permits up until the muzzleloader start date during the 2022 season. Permits were issued between August 1 and September 30 for the 2023 season. The permit issuing process will be the same for the 2024 season.



WHITETAIL DEER SEASON

Choctaw Nation offers some of the best whitetail hunting found in the country. Vast expanses of quality habitat ranging from mixed prairies to managed forests supports a robust population of deer. Strong numbers of deer and a high trophy potential provide quality experiences for the novice and seasoned hunter alike. These factors lead to the Choctaw Nation being the premiere destination for Oklahoma hunters.



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ARCHERY

Archery season ran from October 1-January 15. The bag limit remained the same as in previous years with archery hunters being able to tag 6 deer; no more than 2 antlered.

261 antlerless and 287 antlered deer were harvested by CNO archery hunters as reported in the Chahta Achvffa portal for a total of 548 deer. Antlerless harvest accounted for 47.6% of the harvest down from 48.6% from last season. Overall, these percentages are positive for keeping the deer herd in check and within carrying capacities. Many areas are still experiencing skewed deer sex ratios which can lead to problems and negative consequences for

the herd. Harvesting antlerless deer is an important component of any deer management plan.

Advances in archery equipment and crossbow technology have created a tremendous opportunity to pursue deer for a much longer time frame outside of the firearms seasons. Over time it has become a vital tool for wildlife managers to increase harvest in a growing herd.

YOUTH DEER GUN

The CNO youth deer gun season ran from October 20-22, 2023. Youth season is a great way to introduce kids to hunting. Temperatures are usually much milder this time of year and deer movement is generally picking up by this time. CNO members under 18 years of age were eligible to hunt during this season with a gun. The season limit was 2 with no more than 1 being antlered. The weather for this year was generally favorable. Deer movement was increasing as bucks were in the beginning stages of seeking does.

CNO youth were able to harvest 89 antlerless deer and 116 antlered deer for a total of 196 deer. Harvest was down slightly from the 214 harvested in 2022.

MUZZLELOADER

Muzzleloader season ran from October 28, 2023 through November 5, 2023. The muzzleloader season limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 antlered deer. Conditions for the season were mostly favorable. Many hunters reported seeing a lot of buck movement and some chasing during the season. Pre-rut movement was in full gear as bucks were seeking does in estrous.

Muzzleloader harvest accounted for 100 antlerless and 291 antlered deer for a total of 391 deer harvested. This was up from the 2022 total of 288 deer. The antlerless harvest was down 15% and antlered harvest was up 68% from 2022. With season closing on November 5, in the heat of pre-rut and transitioning into rut, biologists anticipated a higher antlered harvest compared to 2022.

GUN

Arguably more vacation is spent during these two weeks in Southeastern Oklahoma than any other time of the year. Modern deer gun season is a cultural phenomenon that brings together friends, family, and loved ones. Campfire food, stories of seasons past, table games, Thanksgiving, hunting and so much more make this time-honored tradition one of the Choctaw Nation's favorites.

Modern deer gun season began on November 18, 2023 and ran through December 3, 2023. The season limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 antlered deer. Conditions saw cooler weather paired with favorable conditions. Rutting activity was good, and bucks were visible in daylight hours. The CNO gun harvest was 417 antlerless and 542 antlered for a total of 959 deer. This was a 15.2% decrease from the 2022 harvest of 1,131. Antlerless harvest remained steady and antlered harvest saw a decline of 24.3%. Potential reasons for these declines in harvest are discussed in the deer season summary.

HOLIDAY ANTLERLESS DEER GUN

The Holiday Antlerless season provides additional opportunity for people to get out and harvest antlerless deer with a gun. Antlerless deer harvested during this season do not count towards the overall bag limit. CNO members were able to harvest 2

“bonus” antlerless deer from December 18-31. Hunters can use archery, muzzleloader, or modern gun to harvest these 2 deer. The goals of this season are to encourage hunters to harvest antlerless deer, provide opportunities, and balance sex ratios of herds within the Reservation.

CNO members who took advantage of this season harvested 120 antlerless deer, a decrease of 10.45% from the previous season.



DEER SEASON SUMMARY

The Choctaw Nation continues to provide excellent opportunities to hunt whitetail deer. Deer populations are healthy and continue to grow in some areas. Now more than ever is the strong desire of landowners to manage their properties for quality whitetail populations. Many land managers are using tools like fire, timber harvest/thinning, and improving timber stands among many others to provide high quality habitat. This year we were blessed with summer rainfall that led to plentiful browse during the summer and early fall months. Following that prolific browse was a banner acorn crop in many areas of the Reservation. Deer were not as regular to feeders this fall as the abundance of acorns, persimmons, and other mast provided all that they needed. Many people felt like there were fewer deer this season but that is most likely because deer were spread out on the abundant food sources and not as concentrated around feeders and food plots.

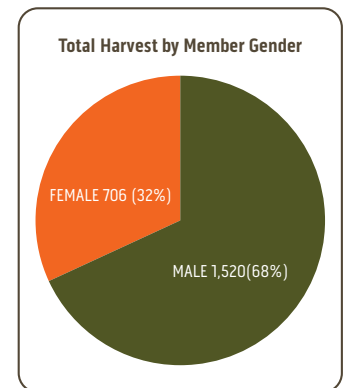
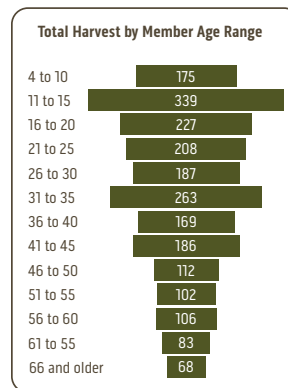
CNDWC was able to examine several does harvested in the holiday antlerless deer gun season and in the last few days of the archery season. These does were in excellent condition with large storages of fat. Fetal measurements estimated that many of these does were bred in the first week of November.

Overall, 987 antlerless deer were harvest along with 1,235 antlered deer for a total of 2,222 deer for the 2023-24 season. Antlerless harvest saw a 11.6% reduction in harvest while antlered deer saw a 7% reduction. The season saw a 9% reduction in harvest overall. Biologists attribute most of this reduction in harvest to the abundance of mast crops available. Deer were less patternable on artificial food sources (feeders, food plots) making hunting more difficult using those methods.

The increase in muzzleloader antlered deer harvest and the decrease in gun antlered harvest was most likely the result of peak pre-rut timing during the muzzleloader season. Chasing and seeking activity by

bucks was starting to drop as the modern gun season hit. Mast crops were still widely abundant during the deer gun season. Hunters relying on feeders saw less success this past fall which most likely led to the overall reduction in harvest.

Last year we reported the impressive number of younger hunters that took advantage of the CNO hunting seasons. This is important because national statistics show that older hunters are not being replaced by younger hunters at a sustainable rate. It is critical to our hunting heritage to get youth involved and in the outdoors. This year hunters 30 years of age and younger harvested 51.1% of the deer taken this season. The 11-15 year old range group was the largest of all ages with 339 deer harvested (15.2% of total harvest). These numbers are a testament to the importance of our hunting heritage to our culture and traditions.



Once again female hunters in the CNO were well above the national averages, harvesting 32% of deer taken. National surveys show that female hunters make up 10 to 25% of the hunting population.

New for the 2024 season, the CNDWC will be offering a program for Choctaw members that want to manage the deer herd on their land. The Deer Herd Enhancement Program (DHEP) will be available for enrollment by May 1. Landowners with 640 acres or more will be able to enroll and have professional guidance from a CNDWC biologist for their land. Biologists will work with landowners to create

management goals, provide habitat advice, and provide harvest recommendations. Check our web page at www.choctawnation.com/services/wildlife-conservation/ for details on enrollment when it becomes available.

ELK SEASON

Through reintroduction efforts by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, small numbers of elk occur within the Reservation. Stockings over the decades have had difficulty sustaining themselves and taking hold. Some thoughts on the causes of these struggles are habitat fragmentation, disease, genetic diversity, poaching, climate, and parasites. The ODWC currently has an elk season that runs concurrently with deer season. This season has a quota of 5 elk and season closes once that quota is met. The Southeast Zone consists of the area south of I-40 and east of I-35.

For 2023 tribal council passed a Title 110 code change that created the first CNO elk season. The CNO elk season ran concurrently with the ODWC season and shared the 5 elk quota. No elk were harvested by tribal members before the season ended due to the quota being met.

TURKEY SEASON

Spring turkey season is a very popular pursuit within the Choctaw Nation. Spring signals the sounds of gobblers through the pine forests and across the prairie. Eastern wild turkeys occupy the eastern portions of the Reservation while Rio Grande wild turkeys and Eastern/Rio Grande hybrids can be found in the Western edge of the Reservation. Wild turkey populations can be sporadic. Currently populations within the Reservation tend to be lower than average. Ongoing research being conducted in the CNO and throughout Oklahoma is looking into some of the causes for these large-scale declines across the landscape. The 2024 season will be the third season that sees pushed back season dates along with a reduced limit from 3 to 1 tom. For Choctaw hunters this will be the first spring that bearded hens are off limits to harvest. These regulation changes

are designed to limit pressure on turkeys during vulnerable times and increase production in the population.

YOUTH TURKEY

Youth turkey season took place on April 8 & 9, 2023. The bag limit was 1 bearded turkey with archery or shotgun equipment. Weather conditions were great for this time of year and gobbling activity was generally good. 11 toms were harvested by youth hunters for the 2023 season.

SPRING TURKEY

Spring turkey season dates were April 16-May 16, 2023. Lower numbers of turkeys and less gobbling activity led to a tough season for quite a few CNO turkey hunters. CNO hunters reported 48 harvested turkeys. This is a 282% increase from last year's harvest of 17 turkeys. Unfortunately, that is most likely not an indicator of a rebounded turkey population. For the 2022 season, the CNO wildlife program and check-in system were still very new and many CNO members were still reporting through the state.

FALL TURKEY

Fall turkey season runs concurrently with deer archery season October 1-January 15. Harvest is allowed with archery equipment only. This was the first turkey season that prohibited the take of bearded hens for tribal members. Many hunters have noticed the decline in turkey numbers and are not pursuing turkeys in the fall. Some have called for the closing of the fall season but with the very minimal harvest, we feel that it is not necessary at this time. 1 tom turkey was harvested by CNO members during the fall season. We will continue to monitor populations and use sound scientific data for the best management of the species.

TURKEY SEASON SUMMARY

If you spend much time at the coffee shop, feed store, or your local sporting goods store you've probably heard many theories as to why the turkey population has declined. Habitat, predators, disease, poaching, and weather are common themes that run throughout these conversations. While biologists can't point to any one factor, it is still paramount to provide the best quality habitat that you can on the property that you manage. Finding the silver bullet that makes populations rebound will be difficult. It is most likely a combination of the factors listed above. Poor habitat makes turkeys more vulnerable to predators. Supplemental feeding concentrates turkeys making them more vulnerable to predators and disease transmission. This same feeding can also increase nest predator populations to above carrying capacity for the land. If you supplementally feed your deer herd, consider giving those feeders a rest in the off season. Natural browse in the summer is more than sufficient to produce trophy sized antlers and healthy deer. Consider turning those feeders off once spring green up is underway until late summer. This small practice is beneficial for wildlife and easier on the pocket book.

Making small improvements to the land you own or manage can sometimes seem futile to the overall scheme but if everyone can make those same improvements, you can generate a positive change over the landscape.



