
CHOCTAW NATION

BIG GAME HARVEST REPORT

2024-2025





Choctaw Nation
**Wildlife
Conservation**

Fall big game seasons are behind us for the 2024-2025 season. The anticipation of October 1 for big game hunters in the Choctaw Nation is something that has become ingrained in our yearly calendars. If anticipation is the word that hunters use for October 1, then dread must be the word that is used to describe January 15. After January 15 comes time for reflection. Reflection on successful hunts, time spent with friends and family, or maybe the one that got away. Turkey season is the next big season that hunters mark on their calendars. Post season scouting or some fishing fill in the time until next season.

For our wildlife associates here in the Choctaw Nation Department of Wildlife Conservation (CNDWC), it is also a time of reflection. Our biologists analyze the thousands of harvest reports submitted by tribal members. They also coordinate with the other tribes that are part of the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement. This historic agreement extended sovereign hunting and fishing rights beyond the borders of the Choctaw Nation and into tribal nations of the Inter-Tribal Council of the Five Civilized Tribes (Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole). Chief Patton, Assistant Chief Jack Austin, Jr. and Choctaw Tribal Council were champions of this agreement, and their steadfast leadership led to this historic agreement. Biologists with each nation now collaborate to capture harvest and biological data for our shared resources.

Fall 2024-2025 hunting seasons marked the third year that Choctaw Tribal Members were regulated by the Choctaw Tribal Code 110: Fish, Game, and Animals Code. 2024-2025 marked the first year that Choctaw Tribal members could hunt and fish in the Chickasaw, Cherokee, Muscogee, and Seminole Nations by carrying their proof of tribal membership. The 5 Tribes Reciprocity Agreement further strengthens tribal sovereignty and creates new and exciting opportunities for collaboration among tribes.

This marks the third installment of the Choctaw Nation Big Game Report. The Big Game Report 2024/2025 is a summary compiled from harvest reports, hunter observations, and what our wildlife associates encountered in the field while collecting data. Choctaw tribal members reporting harvest through the Chahta Achvffa membership portal are a critical piece of the CNDWC. Choctaw tribal members are required by law to check game harvested in the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement area through the Chahta Achvffa membership portal. The data you provide gives biologists insights into population trends, hunter participation, and public land use patterns.

CNDWC wants to hear from you! Please contact us with any observations, questions, concerns, or success stories. You can contact us by email at wildlife@choctawnation.com or by phone at 800-522-6170.



BLACK BEAR SEASON

Black bears were once extirpated from much of their range in the Choctaw Nation. Market hunting, over-exploitation, and an unwarranted fear of the large omnivores led to unregulated hunting and harvest. Thankfully, this is not the case today. Black bears are a modern-day wildlife conservation success story. Through the dedicated work of wildlife professionals, conservationists, and hunters, black bears are now common in much of the Choctaw Nation. Bear populations continue to grow as bears become more common in the western part of the Choctaw Nation. In 2009, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) instituted a black bear season. The Choctaw Nation held its first black bear season in the fall of 2022.

Each October, biologists and game wardens from the CNDWC and the ODWC check-in each harvested bear and collect biological information such as length, skull, and girth measurements as well as tooth samples for aging. Each department shares this information about the harvested animals to keep track of harvest. The biological information collected gives insight into the populations with information such as age, body condition, and size. Harvest data, research, and field surveys all play a role in setting up season structure and bag limits.



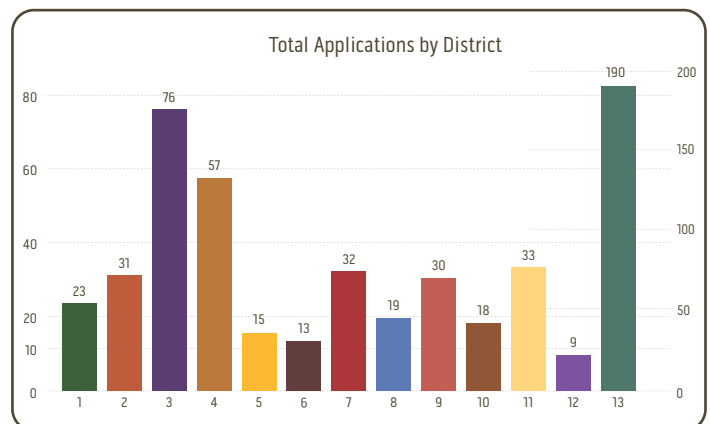
Healthy black bear populations benefit healthy forest ecosystems. Bears tear into decaying stumps, trees, and deadfalls looking for food such as termites, insect larvae, or other insects. This activity breaks down the organic debris and makes it available to other plants to be picked up

in the soil. Bears also disperse seeds of many plants through foraging and passing the seeds through their digestive system.

Meat from the black bear is some of the best wild game meat you can acquire. Hunters rave about the flavor and its similarity to beef. A quick google search for bear meat recipes will turn up many great recipes. The most important aspect of quality bear meat is good care and handling of the carcass in the field.

Mast crops in 2024 were once again heavy in many regions of the Choctaw Nation. Acorns, persimmons, muscadine grapes, and sumac were abundant in most areas. Summer forage was plentiful with adequate rainfall. Early fall saw some dry spells, but the abundance of forage provided by summer and fall mast crops had bears in great condition. Many hunters reported numerous sows with cubs at bait sites. Our staff received several photos of numerous bears at one bait site. Hunters reported passing on several smaller bears until they were able to harvest the one they were after.

A total of 7 bears were harvested during the 2024 archery season by Choctaw tribal members. Muzzleloader season did not see a single harvest for the third year in a row. 3 female and 4 male bears were reported. None of the female bears were with cubs or lactating. State hunters accounted for 70 harvested bears in the 2024 archery and muzzleloader



District 13 represents anyone who lives outside of the Choctaw Reservation

seasons. That makes the total harvested in the Choctaw Nation 77 black bears. Leading up to the season, it looked like harvest levels may be lower than average due to acorns falling before the season opener. That was not the case as harvest was above the above the 5-year average of 69.

CNDWC issued 546 bear permits for 2024, up from 535 the previous season. Muscogee, Chickasaw, and Cherokee tribal members were able to receive free bear permits from CNO this season as a result of the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement.

WHITETAIL DEER SEASON

Deer hunting has long been a cultural phenomenon in Southeast Oklahoma. Schools let out, people burn up their vacation time, and the woods are alive with camo and orange clad hunters trying to tag their deer. The Choctaw Nation served as a refuge for whitetail deer when they were almost extirpated from their western range in Oklahoma. Market hunting had taken a toll on the herd and the vast forests and rugged terrain in the Choctaw Nation provided refuge for the remaining population. This population grew and became a source population for many of the early trap and transplant projects led by the State of Oklahoma. Today our deer herd is thriving and offers some of the best hunting in the country.

Choctaw Nation shares a combined season bag limit of 6 deer, with no more than 2 antlered deer with the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement members and the State of Oklahoma. The combined season limit cannot be exceeded.

ARCHERY

Archery season for the CNO runs concurrently with the state season from October 1-January 15. The bag limit for archery season is 6 deer with no more than 2 being antlered.

320 antlerless and 349 antlered deer were harvested with the CNO Reservation by members of the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement as reported in the Chahta Achvffa portal and shared

data from other tribal wildlife departments. The total of 669 archery harvests represents an increase of 22.1% over last year's harvest. Antlerless harvest accounted for 47.8% of the harvest, up slightly over last year.

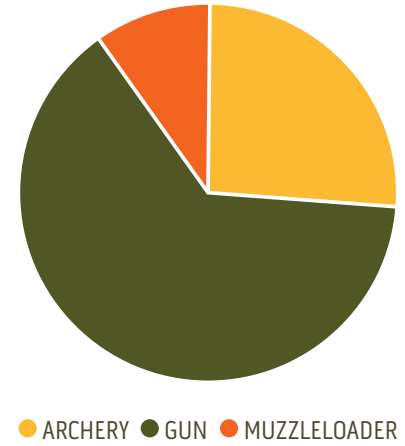
Choctaw tribal members harvested 23 deer with archery equipment in the Cherokee Nation, 26 in the Chickasaw Nation, and 3 in the Muscogee Nation for a total of 52 outside of CNO boundaries. Non-Choctaw tribal members harvested 68 deer within CNO boundaries with archery equipment.

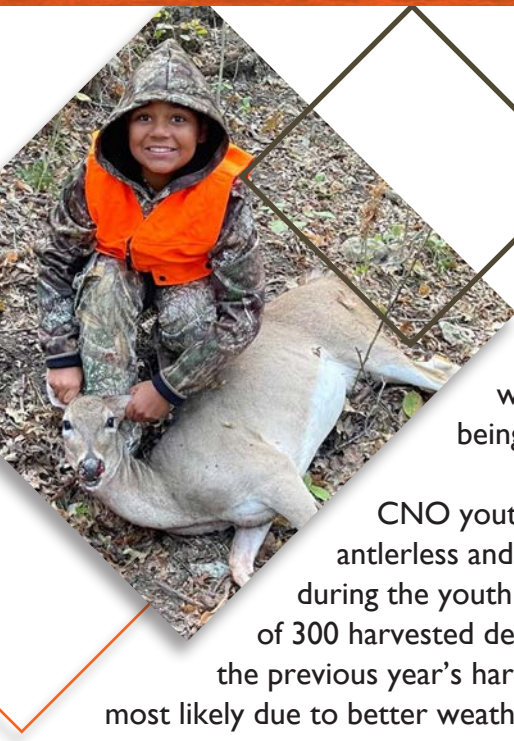
Archery season continues to grow and become an important tool for managing the deer herd. A long season, advances in technology (crossbows, compound bows), and generous bag limit make this method a great choice to get outdoors for longer periods of hunting. Many find the challenge of getting closer to your targeted game with archery equipment as a connection to nature and the animals they pursue.

YOUTH DEER GUN

Youth deer gun season remains a great way to introduce kids to hunting. 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity members under 18 years of age may

Total Harvest by Method





participate in this season. Fall 2024 saw the season run October 18-October 20. The bag limit was 2 deer with no more than 1 being antlered.

CNO youth harvested 166 antlerless and 134 antlered deer during the youth gun season. The total of 300 harvested deer was up 53% over the previous year's harvest of 196. This was most likely due to better weather conditions and good pre-rut activity during the season.

MUZZLELOADER

Fall 2024 muzzleloader season dates ran from October 26-November 3. The bag limit was two with no more than 1 being antlered.

89 antlerless and 172 antlered deer were harvested by members of the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement within the CNO Reservation. The total of 261 was down 33.2% from the previous year's harvest of 391 deer.

Choctaw tribal members harvested 8 muzzleloader deer in the Cherokee Nation and 6 within the Chickasaw Nation for a total of 14 deer taken outside of the CNO boundaries. Non-Choctaw tribal members harvested 14 deer with a muzzleloader within CNO boundaries.

GUN

More people hit the woods and hills during the modern deer gun season than any other season in the Choctaw Nation. Many hunters look forward to this time of year like a child does to Christmas. Deer camps, campfires, Thanksgiving turkey, and priceless

memories made with family and friends make it well worth the anticipation.

Gun season ran from November 23-December 8 and had a bag limit of 2 deer with no more than one being antlered.

1,150 whitetail deer were harvested in the CNO Reservation by members of the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement. The harvest breaks down to 493 antlerless deer and 657 antlered. Modern gun harvest was up 19.9% over the previous season.

Choctaw tribal members harvested an additional 111 deer outside of the CNO boundaries. Non-Choctaw tribal members harvested 151 deer within CNO boundaries.

HOLIDAY ANTLERLESS DEER GUN

The Holiday Antlerless Deer Gun Season gives opportunities for hunters to harvest 2 antlerless deer that are not counted towards the season bag limit. These "bonus" deer are a great way to fill the freezer. Cooler temps and time off for the holidays make this a great way to spend the holiday season. Increased antlerless harvest balances sex ratios in the populations and keep deer densities at sustainable levels.

The Holiday Antlerless Deer Gun season ran from December 18-December 31. The bag limit was 2 antlerless deer that do not count toward the combined season limit of 6.

Choctaw tribal members harvested 139 antlerless deer during the Holiday Antlerless Deer Gun Season, an increase of 15.8% over the 2023 harvest of 120.

CWD TESTING

The CNDWC received funding through the United States Department of Agriculture-Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) to sample harvested deer within the CNO for Chronic Wasting Disease

(CWD). CNDWC partnered with taxidermists and meat processing facilities to collect these samples. 233 deer were tested, and all samples came back negative. CNDWC will continue to monitor the population for CWD and now has a plan in place for CWD management should it ever make its way to the CNO. For more information on CWD visit www.choctawnation.com/services/wildlife-conservation/

NEW DEER PROGRAMS

CNDWC is offering a new program for landowners and lessees wanting to improve deer herds on their property. The Choctaw Nation Deer Herd Enhancement Program (DHEP) is available for those managing 640 acres or more. Biologists will work with landowners to create management goals, provide habitat advice, and provide harvest recommendations. You can enroll by visiting our website at www.choctawnation.com/services/wildlife-conservation/ or by emailing our department at wildlife@choctawnation.com. Applications will be accepted until June 1.

2024 marked the first year that CNDWC introduced the Hunters For Food Sovereignty program. This program paid for the processing of donated harvest for distribution to tribal members. 20 harvested deer were graciously donated by hunters for this effort. Approximately 600 lbs. of lean, ground, organic meat was distributed to five CNO community centers. CNDWC hopes to continue growing this program in the 2025-2026 season to provide many more healthy sustainable meals for Choctaw families who are unable to hunt but still wish to enjoy venison.

DEER SEASON SUMMARY

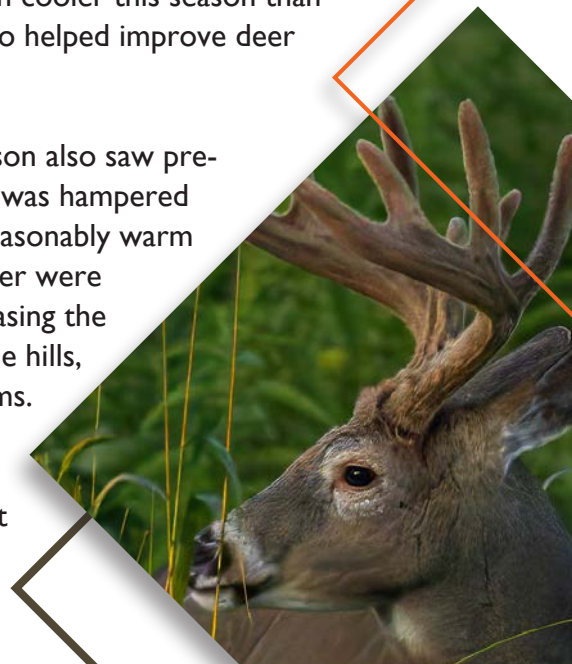
Favorable summer conditions led to healthy deer this fall. Normal rainfall over most of the Choctaw Nation led to abundant browse and forbs. Hard and soft mast crops were also good over much of the Choctaw Nation. Acorns were readily available and had deer spread out over their range. Many hunters using bait expressed frustration with the number of deer seen. Some attributed it to a fall off in the population but the more likely explanation is the presence of natural foods. Corn and commercially available baits can attract deer, but it is hard to pull them away from acorns and persimmons when they are abundant.

Archery season gives hunters the most opportunity due to the long season. Hunters can cherry pick the more productive days of the season (rut) and have more available weekends and holidays. Archery hunters saw more action around attractants later in the season when mast crops had been consumed and what was left was beginning to rot.

Youth Deer Gun Season saw some good pre-rut activity for that time of year. Bucks were already beginning to check out the does and kids had a great chance of seeing bucks on their feet. The weather was much cooler this season than in 2023, which also helped improve deer movement.

Muzzleloader season also saw pre-rut activity, but it was hampered some due to unseasonably warm temperatures. Deer were very scattered chasing the acorns through the hills, ridges, and bottoms. Bucks were moving more but mainly at night due to the warm temperatures.

HUNTERS
FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY



Modern gun season saw cooler weather and the tail end of rutting activity. Acorns were still abundant and hunting feeders and attractants were very hit or miss. CNDWC biologists were able to take fetal measurements on harvested does from the Choctaw Hunting Lodge during the Holiday Antlerless Gun Season. The peak breeding week for the sample was 11/3-11/9. The earliest breeding date was 10/19. The latest breeding date was 11/13.

Overall, 2,519 deer were harvested by tribal members on the CNO Reservation. The antlerless harvest of 1,207 was up 22.3% from 2023-24. The antlered harvest was up 6% over the 2023-24 season. Overall harvest increased 13.4%. One factor that could have affected this increase was the addition hunters from the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement.

The 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement added 233 deer taken within the boundaries of the CNO by non-Choctaw tribal members. Choctaw tribal members were able to harvest 177 deer outside of the CNO under the 5 Tribes Agreement. This historic agreement strengthens tribal sovereignty and provides Choctaw tribal members with additional opportunities to hunt and fish outside of the Choctaw Nation. All that is needed is to carry proof of tribal membership while hunting or fishing within the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, Seminole, or Cherokee Nations.

Harvests are reported to the persons member tribe. Tribal members must follow the hunting and fishing regulations of the Reservation they are hunting or fishing in.

Youth harvest is an encouraging statistic that we see coming from the harvest data year after year. 37.3% of whitetail

deer harvests for the 2024-25 season were submitted from members aged 20 and under. The largest age cohort was the 11-15 age group with 16.7% of the total harvest. National statistics show that older hunters are not being replaced by younger hunters at a sustainable rate. That is not the case with the CNO and is a testament to the traditions and hunting heritage held by tribal members.

ELK SEASON

For the 2024-25 elk season no elk were reported through the Chahta Achvffa membership portal or reported through the 5 Tribes Wildlife Reciprocity Agreement.

Small numbers of elk exist within the Choctaw Nation. Restocking efforts from the state and non-profit agencies have not taken off like they did in Southwest Oklahoma. Numerous reasons could account for this including disease, climate, poaching, parasites, habitat fragmentation, and genetic diversity.

TURKEY SEASON

Red buds and dogwoods blooming, morel mushrooms, and fresh tilled gardens are all things that many people relate to spring. For hunters, these things plus the thunderous gobble of a tom turkey mean that spring has arrived. Spring turkey season is very popular in the woods of the CNO. Hunters come from all over the United States to hunt turkeys in the hills, hollows, and prairies we call home.

Eastern wild turkeys occupy eastern portions of the Reservation, while Rio Grande/Eastern hybrids and Rio Grande wild turkeys occupy the western portions. Wild turkey populations can fluctuate from year to year. For the past few years, the population has seen a downward trend. This last spring, hunters reported seeing many jakes (immature males) while in the field. This was a good sign that the previous years hatch was



successful. Over the summer and fall, CNDWC had numerous good reports of hens with poults. Deer hunters have reported seeing large flocks of jakes which is a great sign for the 2025 turkey season.

YOUTH TURKEY

Spring turkey season runs April 16-May 16 and has a bag limit of 1 tom/jake turkey. Spring weather is often unpredictable in the CNO. Wind, rain, and cold can make for tough hunting conditions but this year was blessed with a few great days in the field. CNO hunters tagged 28 turkeys, a 26.3% decrease from the 2023 season.

SPRING TURKEY

Spring turkey season runs April 16-May 16 and has a bag limit of 1 tom/jake turkey. Spring weather is often unpredictable in the CNO. Wind, rain, and cold can make for tough hunting conditions but this year was blessed with a few great days in the field. CNO hunters tagged 28 turkeys, a 26.3% decrease from the 2023 season.

FALL TURKEY

Fall turkey season runs concurrently with the deer archery season from October 1-January 15. Harvest is allowed with archery equipment only. The harvest for the fall 2024 season was 5 turkeys.

TURKEY SEASON SUMMARY

Population outlooks for wild turkeys have been bleak in the past few years. Poor hatches have led to fewer gobbling turkeys for spring hunters. This trend has not only affected CNO, but many populations throughout the country. Many studies and research projects are taking place right now to try and figure out what is happening. Finding out one cause will be difficult. Many biologists believe it is most likely a combination of factors such as habitat, predators, poaching, disease,

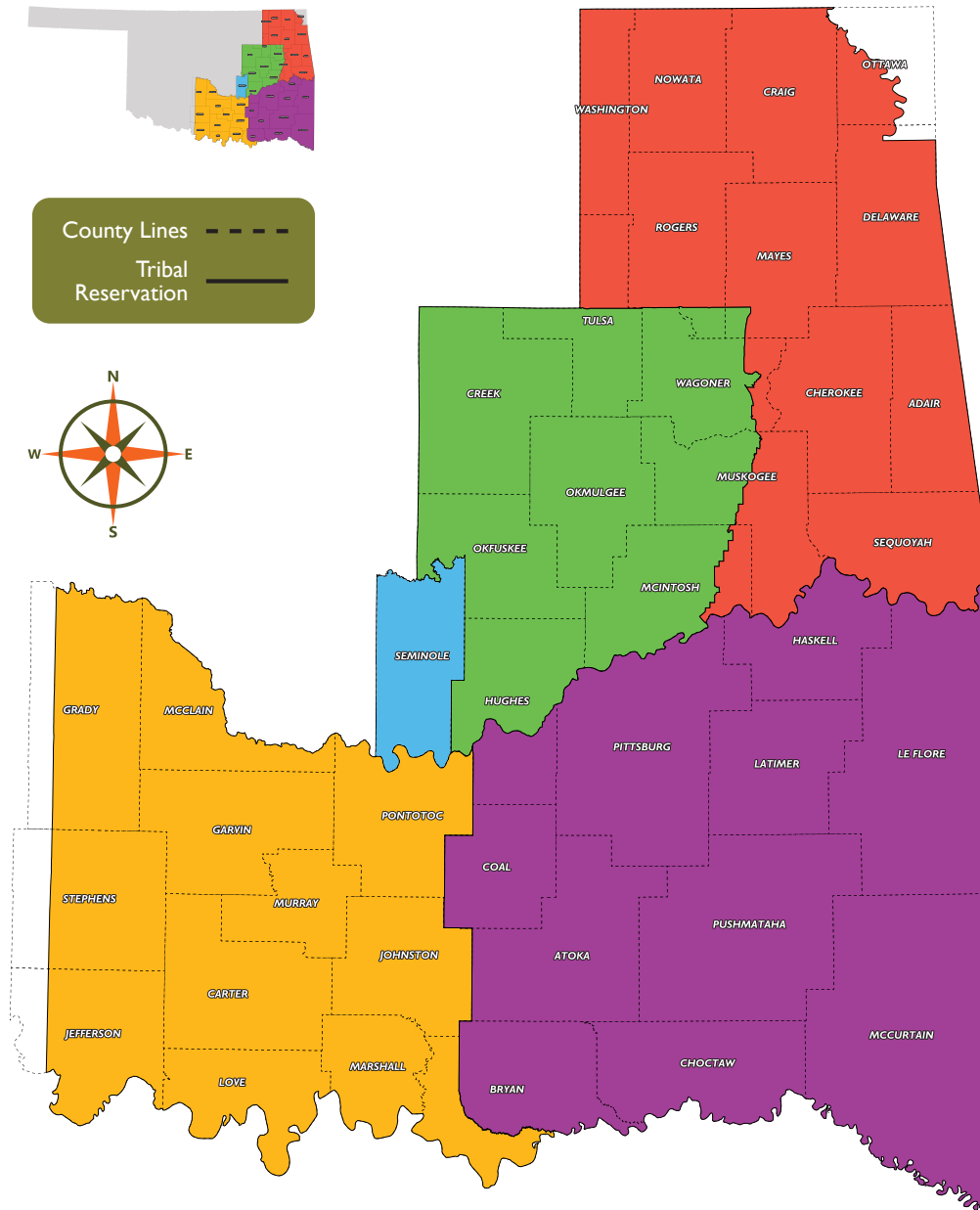
or changing land use patterns. Improving your habitat to benefit turkeys is something landowners can do to help populations. Consider turning off supplemental feeding for deer during the off season. Feeders unnaturally concentrate wildlife. This makes prey species more predictable and vulnerable to predation. Natural browse on good habitat is more than enough to keep deer healthy and produce large antlers. Turning off feeders once green-up occurs until late summer can help nesting turkeys be more successful. This practice is beneficial for wildlife and eases the burden of your pocketbook.

Wildlife management is a marathon, not a sprint. Sometimes small improvements to land management may seem insignificant but over time these changes can bring long-term positive results. It can be hard work and sometimes seem futile but by working together and improving habitat, turkeys can thrive.

FURBEARERS

Trapping and predator hunting could be a good way to help with declining turkey populations. Tribal members must obtain a free permit through the Chahta Achvffa before harvesting bobcat, fox or river otters. Bobcat or river otter pelts held for sale must have a permanent tag affixed to the pelt by the CNO Wildlife Department associate or designated tagging station. This tag will serve as the export tag.





TRIBAL WILDLIFE DEPARTMENTS



Chickasaw Nation

<https://www.chickasaw.net/Services/Community-Services/Chickasaw-Nation-Fish-Wildlife-Service-Hunting-Program>

CNRangers@Chickasaw.net



Choctaw Nation

<https://www.choctawnation.com/services/wildlife-conservation/>

wildlife@choctawnation.com



Cherokee Nation

<https://wildlife.cherokee.org/>

wildlife@cherokee.org



Muscogee (Creek) Nation

<https://www.muscogeenation.com/department-of-interior-affairs/division-of-agriculture-natural-resources/wildlife-program/>

wildlife@muscogeenation.com



Seminole Nation

https://www.sno-nsn.org/getpage.php?name=Wildlife_Park_and_Recreation_Department

wpr@sno-nsn.gov



Choctaw Nation

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For the Choctaw Nation Hunting & Fishing Regulations
visit ChoctawNation.com/services/wildlife-conservation



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