

# **WAFWA COMMISSIONERS' COMMITTEE**

## **BRIEFING PAPER**



### **Issue Topic #2**

### **Shed Hunting Season Coordination**

**WAFWA Mid-Winter Meeting**  
**January 6, 2021**

**TOPIC 2**  
**SHED HUNTING SEASON COORDINATION**  
**WAFWA-WINTER, 2020**

TOPIC 2  
SHED HUNTING SEASON COORDINATION

Arizona does not have a shed hunting season, so there is no coordination between hunting and shed hunting seasons or times of year. There has been some discussion of looking at setting a Season for shed hunting, but the Commission has not entertained the idea officially.

**Briefing Paper — Commissioners Committee  
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources  
Winter WAFWA, January 2021**

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**Subject: Shed-hunting season coordination**

**Background:** Utah has historically allowed the public to collect the shed antlers and horns of big game animals — free of charge — throughout the year. There's only one seasonal requirement: From Feb. 1 to April 15, individuals who want to gather antlers must complete an online antler-gathering ethics course and carry the course-completion certificate with them in the field. The course educates antler collectors about gathering antlers in a way that doesn't stress the animals or damage their habitat. Utah does not currently coordinate its shed-hunting program or season with those of surrounding states.

**Current Status:** The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) recognizes that individuals have different motivations for collecting shed antlers and horns. For some, it's a great way to spend family time outdoors, and for others, it's a purely commercial activity.

Instead of taking a highly regulated approach to shed-antler hunting, the DWR has focused more on educating program participants. The total number of antler collectors in Utah has grown over the past five years, increasing from 18,187 participants in 2016 to 21,184 participants in 2020.

The vast majority of people in the program are Utah residents, ranging from just over 93% in 2016 to 91.5% in 2020. Individuals from surrounding states — specifically Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada and Arizona — make up the large majority (81%) of nonresident certifications each year. Antler collectors from Colorado and Wyoming are No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, among nonresident participants each year. On average, 71.7% of residents and 27.3% of nonresidents had a valid hunting or combination license at the time they took the antler-gathering ethics course.

**The DWR's Position:** The DWR has no immediate plans to align its shed-hunting season or activities with surrounding states. DWR employees closely monitor big game herds during peak antler-collecting months and also take weather conditions (e.g., snow depths and extreme temperatures) into account. If conditions become severe, the DWR may choose to close shed hunting at any point during the year.

**Key Dates:** Antler collecting is legal statewide throughout the year, but participants must have the antler-gathering course's certificate of completion in their possession from Feb. 1 to April 15.

**Key Publics:** Key publics include hunters, the general public, conservation organizations, agricultural interests, environmental groups and government officials.

# Shed Antler Hunting Season



**WAFWA Briefing Paper – December 2020**

The Gunnison Basin was the first Area in Colorado to take a closer look at the shed antler hunting situation. Around the 2005/2006 time period the Gunnison area District Wildlife Managers (DWM) started writing tickets for harassment. At that time it wasn't uncommon to see people out in February on snowshoes waiting for the first bucks to start shedding, or targeting individual bucks that had shed. Federal land managers were also becoming increasingly concerned by increased vehicle traffic in the spring, which was resulting in road damage and off-road travel issues. Based on these concerns, the first issue paper specific for the Gunnison basin for a shed antler collection season was submitted to Colorado's Wildlife Commission in February of 2006. The initial closure dates proposed were Jan 1-March 31 annually. The original issue paper did not pass through Wildlife Commission review, largely based on language that would have prohibited shed antler hunting on private lands.

In July of 2007, a citizen petition issue paper was submitted to the Wildlife Commission from the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee, which is comprised of representatives from CPW, USFS, BLM, NPS, Gunnison County Stockgrowers, and various other constituents. That issue paper included five alternatives, with the preferred being a prohibition of shed antler collecting between March 15th and June 15th annually. Those dates were intended to provide maximum protection for Gunnison sage-grouse during lekking and nesting seasons, however they were not supported by CPW staff because they did not adequately address concerns for wintering big game. Discussions continued throughout 2007, which culminated in final Regulations being passed at the January 2008 Commission meeting. This regulation prohibited the collection of shed antlers between March 15th and May 15th.

Immediately after the adoption of this Regulation, big game advocates in Gunnison began expressing concern about the dates. Their concern was that the dates did not provide adequate protection for wintering big game. Collaboration between CPW, Sportsmen, and sage-grouse advocates resulted in a revised Regulation passed in January of 2009 that prohibited antler collection from Jan 1- March 14. The Regulation also mandated that from March 15-May 15 you could not collect antlers until after 10:00 am, for the protection of lekking sage-grouse.

Over time, other areas across Colorado's western slope began to express concerns with the level of shed antler hunting activity and its impact to wintering wildlife. The Middle Park area and the Eagle River valley were some of the first. In 2015, based on the increasing level of shed antler hunting activity, CPW managers in the Eagle and Roaring Fork valleys passed Regulations similar to the Gunnison Basin regulations.

In 2017-2018, the first comprehensive west slope issue paper was introduced, proposing no collection of antlers from Jan 1-April 30 on all public lands. Colorado looked to other western states during that process, and adopted similar season dates to Wyoming. Colorado also looked to Wyoming for regulatory definitions.

In the early years of the west slope regulation, we received a lot of complaints. We would group those complaints into three broad categories:

1. "I don't impact deer and elk when I am shed hunting because I know how to avoid disturbing them" (they didn't recognize that 1,000 other people were out there at the same time)
2. "The Regulation punishes honest people, because all the sheds will be gone by the time the season opens" (A real issue that requires serious law enforcement)
3. "Not all places in western Colorado have harsh winters and shed hunting is not as big of a deal" (There is really no one-size fits all restriction, but wildlife getting chased around winter range was not in the best interest of our big game regardless of where you were)

CPW has posted signs at many key access points highlighting the Regulation and season dates, issued press releases, done significant public outreach through field contacts and within other venues, and invested significantly in enforcement. Enforcement efforts have included saturation patrols, decoy antler operations, trail cameras and seismic monitor deployment in key winter ranges, and the use of radio telemetry equipped shed antlers. Because of the current intensity of shed antler collection, it has become a significant draw on DWM time across the west slope of Colorado. As other western states have likely experienced, to be truly effective in detecting illegal shed antler hunters, Wildlife Officers must expend a significant amount of effort at all times of the day. The two weeks prior to the season opening are perhaps the most challenging, but each year varies depending on snow cover and big game distribution across winter ranges. Sustained and visible enforcement is key to sustaining public support for this Regulation.

CPW has been fortunate to have Federal Agency cooperation and interest in our shed hunting regulations. The current CPW Regulations compliment Federal motorized closures, and we are in regular communication regarding any issues that arise on an annual basis. Federal officers from the USFS, BLM, and NPS help out annually, some of whom we've issued special Wildlife Officer commissions.

Synchronizing season dates to the greatest extent practical may be in all of our best interests. Colorado sees shed antler hunters from many western states each year. With the explosion of interest and raw economics of shed hunting, people are building businesses out of traveling across western states each spring, which is easy to do by chasing opening dates in different states.

#### **Regulation #002 (O). Antler and Horn Collection**

These regulations govern the collection of shed antlers, shed horns, or antlers or horns naturally attached to skull plates.

1. On any lands east of I-25, any person may, with lawful access, collect shed antlers or horns at any time. On private lands west of I-25, any person may, with lawful access, collect shed antlers or horns at any time. Public lands west of I-25 are closed to collection from January 1 through April 30, annually. On public lands west of I-25, any person may collect shed antlers or horns from May 1 through December 31, annually, except in GMUs 54, 55, 66, 67, and 551 where the collection of shed antlers or horns shall further be prohibited between legal sunset and 10:00 AM from May 1 through May 15 annually.

2. Possession of antlers or horns on public lands west of I-25 from January 1 through April 30 is prohibited. Possession of antlers or horns on public lands in GMUs 54, 55, 66, 67, and 551 between legal sunset and 10:00 AM from May 1 through May 15 annually is prohibited. Possession of antlers or horns on private property without lawful access is prohibited. Each antler or horn will be treated singularly for the purpose of this regulation, unless naturally attached together on a skull plate.

3. For the purpose of this regulatory provision, the following terms have the following definitions:

- a. "Antlers" means the bony, deciduous appendages protruding from the heads of members of the deer family (Cervidae), including deer, elk, and moose.
- b. "Collect" means to search for, locate, stockpile, or possess shed antlers, shed horns, or antlers or horns naturally attached to skull plates of big game animals on public land or attempt to search for, locate, stockpile, or possess shed antlers, shed horns, or antlers or horns naturally attached to skull plates of big game animals on public land. 12
- c. "Horns" means the hard, permanent or deciduous appendages protruding from the heads of bighorn sheep, mountain goats, or pronghorn.
- d. "Public land(s)" means federal lands and lands owned or administered by the Division.
- e. "Shed antler" or "shed horn" means one or more antlers and/or horns having become naturally separated from the skull.

**Idaho Department of Fish and Game**  
**Commissioner Issues Report to the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies**  
**Winter 2021**

**Issue Topic #2: Shed Hunting Season Coordination**

Hunting for shed deer and elk antlers is a popular winter-spring recreational activity enjoyed by many people. Idaho statute allows possession or sale of naturally shed antlers or horns of deer, elk, moose, antelope and mountain goat, as well as the antlers or horns of deer, elk, moose, antelope and mountain goat which have died of natural causes. Additionally, Idaho rule allows the possession and sale of deer and elk antlers legally killed, salvaged from road-killed animals, or animals found dead of natural causes. Antler prices in the last few years has demonstrated that sale of collected antlers can result in a significant amount of additional income, which likely provides additional incentive for even more participants.

The apparent increase in popularity of shed antler hunting in recent years has renewed concerns about the effects of shed hunting as a disturbance to wintering big game. Intuitively, disturbance, particularly when deer and elk are heavily concentrated in years with deeper snow pack, results in greater energy expenditures of these animals during their greatest period of stress. However, it is extremely difficult to establish a direct correlation between specific disturbance caused by antler hunters and the over-winter survival of deer and elk, and even more difficult to tease out the effects of disturbance caused by antler hunters vs. the cumulative disturbance of all recreational activity during the key time. While Idaho law addresses harassment of wildlife with motorized vehicles and dogs, any burden of evidence for molestation of big game by people on foot is difficult to achieve.

From 1994 through January 2003, Department rules restricted the pick-up of shed antlers of deer, elk, and moose by area and time (closed Jan 1 – Apr 30) in the Southeast and Upper Snake regions. The Commission rescinded this seasonal restriction in January 2003 because the restriction did not appear to affect the total number of recreational users present on big game winter range on public lands so the restriction was not achieving the desired outcome. The Department opted to address recreational disturbance to winter range through federal land management planning processes, which could consider appropriate seasonal access restrictions for recreational activities more generally – an authority that the Commission does not have.

In response to concerns about disturbance to deer and elk potentially caused by shed-antler hunters and other recreationists during the severe winter of 2017, the Department closed several Fish and Game Wildlife Management Areas in eastern Idaho to all public access, using the Director's authority to close seasons or public access to wildlife management areas in the event of an emergency.

Currently, there is no specific statutory authorization for the Commission to regulate collection/possession of naturally shed antlers. Achieving new legislative authority would be necessary for the Commission to establish shed hunting seasons that might be coordinated with other states.

## **Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Winter 2021**

### **Commissioners' Committee Topic Briefing – Kansas**

#### **Shed Hunting Season Coordination**

There is no established shed hunting season in Kansas, and while shed hunting is a popular hobby for many deer hunters, most occurs on private land with permission from landowners. Shed hunting is not allowed on the 1 million acres enrolled in the Walk-in Hunting Access Program (WIHA) because those lease agreements with landowners allow hunting only. Shed hunting is allowed on all land owned by the department, as well as federal land leased by the department and managed for public hunting. The only potential conflict surrounding shed hunting in Kansas came up to the Commission several years ago, when hunters learned that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did not allow shed hunting on national wildlife refuges. There are four NWRs in Kansas, Kirwin, Quivira, Flint Hills and Marais des Cygnes.



WAFWA Commissioners Committee Brief – **Issue 2.**

**Issue 2. Shed hunting season coordination.**

Nebraska does not have any limits on shed hunting seasons. Shed antlers can be picked up, possessed and sold at any time in the year. While there is growing interest in shed hunting, we have not had significant conflicts regarding this activity.





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### **Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Nevada Department of Wildlife Commissioner's Committee Meeting Issue Topics**

#### **2. Shed hunting season coordination**

In March of 2018, the Wildlife Commission took on collecting shed antlers (shed hunting) in Nevada by passing a regulation preventing shed hunting in parts of Nevada during specific seasons. This regulation became Nevada Administrative Code (NAC) 503.172. The statute seasonally closed shed hunting in six counties (Elko, Eureka, Lander, Lincoln, Nye, and White Pine) of Nevada.

Shed hunting has been popular outdoor recreation but may have increased due to the Covid-19-related surge in outdoor recreation. Resident and non-resident shed hunters search mule deer and elk winter ranges collecting shed antlers to sell them for approximately \$10 - \$15 per pound. Other shed hunters search to add antler sets to their personal collections. A single brown elk antler may weigh fifteen pounds and at \$13 per pound, would be worth nearly \$200. A very large set of antlers has the potential to be worth thousands of dollars.

It is not uncommon to hear about large groups of 20 or more non-resident shed hunters camping in areas of eastern Nevada and spending weeks searching for antlers. Prior to Nevada instituting a closed shed antler season, other states had implemented shed hunting seasons which resulted in extreme numbers of non-residents combing the hills and valleys of Nevada. This heavy pressure from shed hunters caused animals to move into sub-par habitat and expend crucial energy reserves during critical winter months. The eastern Nevada counties have the most concentrated deer and elk winter ranges, most severe winters, and the heaviest shed hunting pressure in the state. One of the greatest concerns about off-road shed hunters is that they drive across areas of Sage-grouse habitat used for strutting grounds or nesting areas, disrupting and destroying crucial habitat of a struggling species.

Ethics plays a large role in how people choose to search for shed antlers. Some shed hunters walk while others ride All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV's) or side-by-sides cross country hoping to find shed antlers simply by driving across the landscape. The use of para-planes, helicopters, and drones is not uncommon. Antler traps have been found, where people hang wire across big game trails in the hopes that bucks or bulls may hook their antlers on the wire and pull hard enough to cause them to drop. Some people locate sheds prior to the opening of shed season and either mark sheds with a GPS or stash antlers and collect them on opening day. Citations have been issued in many cases but the value of the shed antlers on the market is such that some may consider it the cost of doing business.

Coordinating with surrounding states to enact consistent shed hunting seasons might reduce the pressure non-residents place on Nevada habitat. Other states manage buck and bull ratios much lower than Nevada, resulting in continued heavy pressure on Nevada habitat by people hoping to find large antlers. The effects of the added stress on Nevada wildlife at the end of winter is unknown, but likely not beneficial.



## WAFWA Issue Topics, Mid-Winter 2021

State: New Mexico

Agency Director: Michael B. Sloane

### **Fees for Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) –**

To access WMAs and all State Game Commission (SGC) lands in New Mexico, each hunter or angler must possess a Habitat Management and Access Validation (HMAV) and the proper license, valid during eligible hunt dates published in the New Mexico Hunting and Fishing Rules and Information booklet. Each properly-licensed hunter or angler may be accompanied by up to three (3) guests.

Individuals or groups accessing a WMA for Wildlife-Associated Recreation (example: wildlife viewing, photography, etc.), must have at least one out of every four adults in possession of at least one (1) hunting license, fishing license, trapping license **or** Habitat Management and Access Validation (HMAV), valid for the current license year. Youth under the age of 18 are exempt from license and validation requirements.

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

### **Shed Hunting–**

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish does not currently issue any closures, on public land, specifically for shed hunting. There are areas of the state that are closed to access for various activities that may include shed hunting, but there are no areas that are closed for this reason only.

### **Fair Chase–**

In 2019, the New Mexico State Game Commission passed a Fair Chase Rule that allows the Department to withhold location data that could be used to harm an animal or population, or could be used contrary to fair chase principals. Location data that is less specific can be shared with the public, and location data to be used for scientific or management purposes can be shared if the cooperators enter into a data sharing agreement with the Department.

Other rules specific to Fair Chase include:

- Hunting or shooting at any animal from an aircraft or drone or flying an aircraft in any manner which causes any non-domesticated animal to move from its place of rest or change its direction of travel.
- Use of any cellular, Wi-Fi or satellite camera for the purpose of hunting or scouting remotely for any big game animal.

**Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**WAFWA Mid-Winter Meeting – January 2021**  
**Shed Hunting Season Coordination**

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) does not conduct a shed hunting season in Oregon. Only naturally shed antlers may be possessed without a permit from the Department. No parts may be collected from an animal that died of natural causes or killed for humane reasons.

To reduce wildlife disturbance on wintering big game, six Department owned wildlife areas have winter range area closures for all recreational access. These closure dates generally run from December through mid-April, depending on the individual wildlife area.

Although the Department does not prohibit shed hunting, these six wildlife areas are closed to public access during the usual shedding period and when deer and elk are concentrated on winter range. The closure on these lands does cause some opening day crowding during the spring when access is reopened. These six wildlife areas can see a fair amount of use from shed hunters from neighboring states where access or collecting sheds is restricted.

Enforcement efforts using saturation patrols, trail cameras and trailhead monitoring is used to enforce compliance. The Department does not restrict shed hunting on other public or private lands. Access restrictions on these lands are at the will of the landowner or managing agency.

Due to the relatively new market of antler dog chews, there has been a noticeable participation increase in shed hunting. Some individuals are setting up “antler traps” to try to ensnare the deer and elk antlers in a series of ropes or nets in order to hold the animal until the antlers are forcibly ripped off the animal. This setup can harass, injure or kill the antlered animal. The Department may propose rule changes to prohibit the use of antler traps and/or more closely regulate the sale of antlers other than those that are naturally shed. Proposed rule changes would undergo public review and consideration by Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission.

## Issue Topic #2: Shed Hunting Season Coordination

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

December 4, 2020

Antler hunting continues to grow in popularity and agencies struggle with the amount of oversight that this activity requires. While most everyone agrees that harassing wildlife during the stressful winter months is not beneficial, it has been difficult to assess how antler hunting fits into this equation. Many states lack specific information or research that identifies antler hunting as a harmful activity. The public is often divided on this issue as well. Some think it is crucial to protect wintering animals while others want the opportunity to participate in antler hunting activities as winter recreation. Rules to curb this activity are often difficult to write and enforce.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife does not currently regulate antler hunting. We do however have seasonal access closures on lands that we manage, to protect wintering wildlife, especially ungulates. We also coordinate with other public land managers to occasionally ask them to close their lands to also protect wintering wildlife. In certain high use areas with lots of wintering elk, we coordinate and enforce the “opener” of WDFW ownership in the spring to ensure there is order as vehicles line up to gain access.



**Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  
Commissioner Committee Topics  
Mid-Winter Meeting, June - December 2020  
Director Brian Nesvik**

***Issue Topic #2 Shed Hunting Season Coordination***

Since 2009, Wyoming has prohibited the collection of shed antlers and horns on public land, including U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Commission administered lands west of the Continental Divide (excluding the Great Divide Basin), from Jan. 1 through April 30 of each year. To collect means to search for, locate, stockpile or possess shed antlers and horns of big game animals on public land or attempt to search for, locate, stockpile or possess shed antlers and horns of big game animals on public land during the closed season. A violation of this regulation carries the same penalties as many other Game and Fish violations.

In 2019, new legislation granted the Commission the authority to regulate shed antler collection throughout the year in expanded areas across the state. The Commission acted on this expanded authority by including the Platte Valley in the southeast corner of the state and set a shed antler start date/time of May 1, 2020 at noon. Recently, the Commission modified the start time to 6 a.m. beginning May 1, 2021.

The Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments adopts regulations that prohibit the collection of shed antlers on their lands that are within the boundaries of the Commission's antler regulation.

Collecting shed antlers remains a popular pursuit and our field employees noticed a large influx of out-of-state collectors this year.