
CHAPTER 8: DEER MANAGEMENT REPORT

From: 1 July 2012
To: 30 June 2014

LOCATION

GAME MANAGEMENT UNIT: 6 (10,140 mi²)

GEOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION: Prince William Sound and North Gulf Coast

BACKGROUND

The Cordova Chamber of Commerce introduced Sitka black-tailed deer into Unit 6 between 1916 and 1923 (Paul 2009). At least 24 deer were released on Hawkins and Hinchinbrook islands in Prince William Sound (PWS). This was the first big game translocation in the state and was one of the most successful. Deer quickly occupied vacant habitat on most islands and adjacent mainland in PWS. Nearly the entire deer population occurs in Unit 6D. The population peaked in 1945, resulting in habitat damage and long-term reduction in carrying capacity according to Cordova district staff in contributions to Alaska Game Commission reports (Fred Robards, Alaska Game Commission 1952). High winter mortality occurred in the late 1940s, mid-1950s, late 1960s, early 1970s (Reynolds 1979), and late 1990s (Crowley 2001). Predation is minimal because there are few wolves and coyotes off the mainland and bears are believed to prey on them only opportunistically.

Sitka black-tailed deer in Unit 6 are at the extreme northern limit of their range (Cowan 1969). The population usually thrives because of mild, maritime climate conditions on islands in PWS (Shishido 1986). Snow-shading canopies of old-growth forest provide accessible forage and shelter during winter, especially on the larger watersheds of the big islands (Hawkins, Hinchinbrook and Montague islands; Shishido 1986, Reynolds 1979). If forbs eventually become buried by deeper snow, blueberry stems (*Vaccinium ovalifolium*) become important forage, as does kelp.

Sitka black-tailed deer are excellent swimmers and often take to the sea in small herds for travel to neighboring islands. A resulting theory held by some local residents is of a seasonal migration of deer in PWS. Reynolds (1979) and Shishido (1986) reported that marking studies of deer in PWS do not support this theory. Deer may be dispersing from areas of high density in search of better forage, particularly when deer numbers are increasing. Deer-tagging studies in PWS indicated that seasonal movements were primarily changes in elevation, with only 2 deer traveling up to 14 km from the locations where marked. (Shishido 1986, Reynolds 1979). Schoen and Kirchoff (1984) tracked a movement of 13.6 km by only 1 radiocollared deer in Southeast Alaska and determined it had dispersed from its natal watershed.

The most important factors limiting the deer population are snow depth and snowpack duration (Reynolds 1979). A series of mild winters allows deer to increase and disperse to less favorable habitat, only to decline during severe winters from starvation. Hunting can be a limiting factor in local areas when deep snow concentrates deer on beaches during open season (Reynolds 1979). Harvest may become a more significant factor in the future if numbers of hunters increase. However, weather will continue to constrain hunter access.

Legal deer hunting began in 1935. It was monitored from 1960 through 1979 by harvest reports and hunter contacts. Beginning in 1980, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) collected most information through questionnaires mailed to deer harvest ticket holders. Annual harvests before 1978 probably ranged between 500 and 1,500 (Reynolds 1979). Harvests began to increase after 1978 and rose to 3,000 by 1987. The average estimated harvest during the 1990s was 2,160, ranging from 1,300 to 3,000 deer. The average estimated harvest during the 2000s was 2,460, ranging from 1,400 to 3,500 deer. In 2011, ADF&G began collecting deer harvest data within the harvest ticket system. Rather than sampling participants, gathering data from all individuals that acquired harvest tickets was pursued. Evaluation of this new system is ongoing.

Clear-cut logging of old-growth forest on private land in PWS was once the most important deer management concern in Unit 6 (Nowlin 1997). Currently there are no logging operations planned within important deer habitat.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

- Deer in Unit 6 were designated as a big game prey population for intensive management by the Board of Game in 2001. The intensive management objective was set at 24,000–28,000 deer capable of sustaining an annual harvest of 2,200–3,000 deer.
- Maintain a minimum harvest of 60% males.
- Maintain a minimum hunter success rate of 50%.

METHODS

ADF&G and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) cooperate to monitor the population trend in PWS. We conduct annual pellet-group surveys along transects (Kirchhoff and Pitcher 1988) during late May and early June at 8 sampling locations (Fig. 1). Each location has 3 to 5 transects consisting of a straight line of 1- x 20-meter plots running uphill from the beach fringe. Most transects terminate at alpine habitat. Those not reaching the alpine terminate after we examine 100 plots. The number of plots varies, depending on the distance from the beach to the alpine and the persistence of snow during the survey. The minimum number of plots within a location was 164. The number of plots completed in each area depends on the amount of persistent snow. Transects are terminated when snowcover approaches 100% for the remainder of the transect. We calculate mean numbers of pellet groups per plot (MPGP) for each location and all locations combined. Kirchhoff and Pitcher (1988) suggested that MPGPs of 0.50 to 0.99, 1.00 to 1.99, and 2.00 to 2.99 relate to low, moderate, and high deer densities, respectively, for Southeast Alaska. These densities were generated for southeast Alaska and are not reasonable (have never been observed) in Prince William Sound (PWS). Deer are likely not as productive here due to the area's greater

rainfall and colder temps. Jenks natural breaks optimization was used to analyze the PWS deer pellet data into high, medium, and low categories. Based on these data, mean pellet groups per plot below 0.89 MPGP may indicate a low population, between 0.89 and 1.35 MPGP may indicate a medium population, and above 1.35 MPGP may indicate that the population is high.

Harvest data are summarized by regulatory year (RY), which begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., RY12 = 1 July 2012–30 June 2013). From RY80 through RY10, we estimated deer harvest from responses to questionnaires mailed to deer hunters who were issued harvest tickets in Southcentral Alaska. Approximately 3,000 questionnaires (30% of harvest ticket holders) were mailed to hunters annually, with a response rate averaging 66%. Follow-up letters were sent to nonresponders to attempt to achieve more complete data.

Data since RY11 were produced by using the harvest ticket system. Rather than select participants receiving questionnaires, all hunters are expected to report their activity. These data must be edited for accuracy in coding and data entry errors. While the harvest questionnaire provided a map for hunters to indicate where they focused their effort, the harvest ticket system relies on an open-ended response to location. As a result, follow-up letters must be sent to many hunters, from the Cordova office, to get more precise harvest location data. Response rates are low; therefore, harvest estimates must be expanded to account for nonresponse. This information was summarized for total harvest, hunter residency and success, harvest chronology, and transportation methods for Unit 6. Harvest data were grouped into geographic areas that included Hinchinbrook Island, Montague Island, Hawkins Island, western PWS, and northern and eastern PWS (Fig. 2).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

POPULATION STATUS AND TREND

Population Size

Deer density indices in PWS, based on mean pellet groups per plot (MPGPP), declined from moderate to low during the reporting period (Fig. 1, Fig. 3, Table 1). These results correspond with anecdotal reports that estimated a 50–70% decline in the population. Deer numbers appear to have declined due to the winter of RY11, which was the most severe winter on record in terms of total snowfall and snow retention, particularly in western PWS (Fig. 4). Hawkins and Hinchinbrook islands tend to accumulate less snow than islands in western PWS because a slight temperature cline produces more rain in the east. Indeed, higher pellet group densities were observed there. In addition, both eastern islands have extensive old growth forests to support wintering deer, whereas the smaller islands of western PWS have smaller watersheds and much less winter habitat. Although Montague Island has large watersheds, much of the best deer winter habitat was clearcut during the 1980s and 1990s and the island often receives tremendous amounts of snowfall. The deer pellet surveys in 2013, the first year expected to detect the results of the severe winter of RY11, found the lowest indices on record. The 2014 survey found slight improvement, which corresponds with anecdotal reports that deer numbers are increasing.

Distribution and Movements

Deer currently occupy most of Unit 6. Highest deer indices in Unit 6D (PWS) were observed on Hinchinbrook and Hawkins islands (Fig. 1). Lower indices were observed on smaller islands and

mainland areas surrounding PWS. Occasional sightings have occurred in Units 6B and 6A, and, usually following several mild winters, on the Kenai Peninsula and as far north and west as Anchorage.

Shishido (1986), using radiocollared deer on Hinchinbrook Island, determined that deer tended to make seasonal, elevational movements within a single watershed, with timing of movements controlled by snow persistence. He estimated that average size of a deer's winter home range was 160 hectares (ha), versus 282 ha for spring, with seasonal home ranges overlapping. Sitka black-tailed deer are excellent swimmers and often take to the sea singly or in small herds for travel to neighboring islands.

MORTALITY

Harvest

Season and Bag Limit. The season for resident and nonresident hunters was 1 August–31 December. The bag limit was 5 deer for residents and 4 for nonresidents. Female deer could be taken beginning 1 October.

Board of Game Actions and Emergency Orders. An emergency order was issued that closed the state deer season on 7 December 2012 to respond to the extreme winter mortality event of the previous winter. The hunting season for federally qualified users on federal land closed for antlerless concurrently but remained open for antlered deer for the duration of the season.

In 2013, an emergency order was issued in response to the confirmed decline in the population. The buck season was unaffected but the doe season was closed 11:59 p.m. 31 October 2013. The season for does on federal land was also closed 11:59 p.m. 1 November 2013.

Hunter Harvest. Although the deer population level is usually reflected by harvest, prevailing weather conditions during the season can influence hunter activity and harvest. Total estimated deer harvest reported in Unit 6 during RY11 was revised up to 3,168 deer since the last reporting period. This is a substantial increase from RY09 and RY10 at 1,817 deer and 1,892 deer respectively (Table 2, Fig. 5). The high harvest in RY11 can likely be attributed to the early onset and persistence of significant snow that concentrated deer on the beach where they could be harvested. Conversely, the 2 years that followed the extreme weather event of RY11 have 2 of the lowest harvests on record. In RY12, the harvest was estimated at 630 deer. While this seems extreme, anecdotal reports suggest that many people perceived that the population was too low to present a reasonable chance of hunting success. Harvest in RY13 increased slightly to 674 deer. Effort and a low deer population were factors contributing to this low harvest.

Harvest declines were most significant on Hawkins Island where estimated harvest dropped from 978 deer in RY11 to 54 in RY12 (a 95% decline; Table 2). Hinchinbrook Island had the second largest decline in harvest, dropping from 659 deer in RY11 to 124 in RY12 (an 81% decline). These declines may have been more influenced by effort than population status. Cordova residents predominantly hunt on these 2 islands. Being keenly aware of the severity of the winter of 2011–2012 and the resulting deer die off, more hunters may have abstained from hunting. Estimated harvests in the western portion of Prince William Sound changed from 521 deer in RY11 to 114 in RY12 (a 78% decline.) However, the effects of that winter were thought to have been worse in the western portion of PWS.

The 5-year (RY09–RY13) average of estimated harvests of deer by area hunters demonstrates that Montague Island (462 deer) yields the highest average annual number of deer, with the next highest being Hawkins Island (380 deer) and then Hinchinbrook (368 deer; Fig. 2).

It is important to note that during this time, the method for estimating harvest changed as previously mentioned. Hunters have been somewhat slow to acknowledge the mandatory reporting requirement that was implemented to replace the previous hunter survey system, for which only selected hunters were required to respond. Due to high rates of “nonreporting,” adjustments are made to account for harvest that is likely to have come from nonresponders. It is important to note that 25% (RY12) to 36% (RY11) of the harvest was extrapolated to account for nonresponse.

Hunter Residency and Success. Success was defined as hunters reporting at least 1 day in the field and taking at least 1 deer during the hunting season. Deer hunters had annual success rates of 33% and 37%, respectively, during the 2 years of the reporting period, which were the lowest since we began officially quantifying harvest in a comparable way in 1984 (Table 3). The success rate of 68% in RY11 may be a result of early and significant snowfall as mentioned above. Nonlocal residents represented 61–69% of successful hunters during this reporting period. Local residents on average (5-year mean, RY09-RY13) killed 1.7 deer per hunter compared to 1.0 deer per hunter for nonlocal residents. The number of deer taken per hunter in both years of this reporting period was lower than the 10-year average RY04-RY13. For local residents, the number of deer harvested per hunter was the lowest on record. Nonresidents remained minor contributors to the deer harvest.

Harvest Chronology. In this reporting period, hunters killed the most deer during November and December (Table 4). Many hunters prefer this period because snowfall moves deer to lower elevations and increases visibility. During November the rut was in progress, making bucks more vulnerable to harvest. A higher proportion of the harvest was taken in October than December which is a return to the more normal trend. Harvest in RY10 and RY11 had shifted in recent years to more deer killed in December probably related to the timing of significant snowfall.

Transport Methods. Similar to previous years, hunters primarily used boats (81% 10-year average, RY04-RY13) but some use airplanes (14% 10-year average, RY04-RY13). Other modes, including 3- and 4-wheelers, highway vehicles, and walking, were not used significantly (Table 5). RY12, the first year following the large snow event of RY11 showed an increase in the percentage of hunters that used airplanes when in fact, airplane based hunters were simply more stable while boat based hunters dropped dramatically.

Other Mortality

Wounding loss and illegal harvest together were estimated to be at least 15% of the total reported harvest (Table 2). No major mortality events were observed during this reporting period.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Under its regulatory authority for intensive management (AS 16.05.255) the Alaska Board of Game has mandated our deer population objective as 24,000– 28,000 deer and our harvest objective as 2,200–3,000 (5AAC 92.108). Because we have no estimate of population size, this

objective is, at best, an educated guess at the historical number of deer harvested to support human needs. Obtaining a population estimate has not been identified as a priority because of the survey challenges associated with finding and counting forest dwelling animals. However, based on pellet-group density, reports from stakeholders, and carcass counts, it is likely that deer numbers declined in PWS because of unprecedented snowfall and are slowly rebuilding.

Deer pellet indices are highest on Hawkins and Hinchinbrook islands, possibly indicating that more deer occur there than on other islands. However, participation in the hunt (based on hunter days per area) is highest on Montague, with the next highest western PWS. This is likely due to access from Whittier and is not reflective of deer density. Although reasonable hunting opportunity exists to sustain the intensive management objective of 2,200–3,000 deer, hunters reported taking fewer deer during the reporting period. With increased fuel costs, effort may be focused in lower quality areas that are closer to port.

We have implemented but hunters are still transitioning to a new harvest reporting process. More work should be done to inform hunters about the new harvest reporting system. Additionally, the department must develop appropriate means of assessing unreported harvest within the new system.

Pellet-group surveys and harvest data (via hunter questionnaires and now harvest ticket data) were effective tools to monitor and manage deer in Unit 6. MGP has been a reliable index to population trend. A research project is being developed using money from a legislative Capital Improvement Project to investigate accuracy of deer pellet data using DNA. Other components of the study will likely involve movement, nutrition, and carrying capacity, comparing these factors between high and low density areas.

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While this unit report was actually published in 2016, it is part of the set of 2015 unit species management reports, so we suggest citing the report as a 2015 report to maintain its relationship to the other 2015 unit reports.

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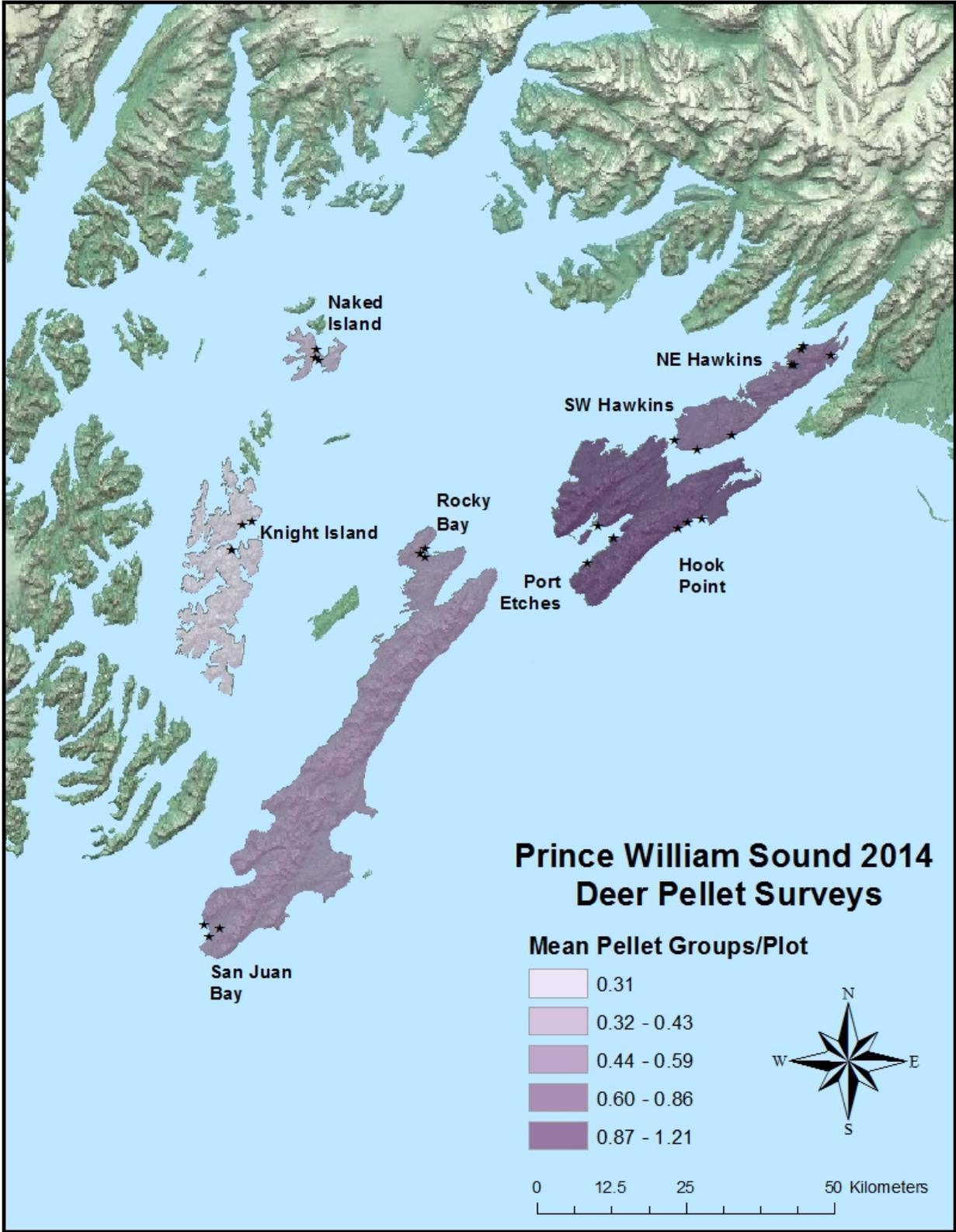


Figure 1. Locations of pellet group transects (stars) and deer pellet density by island for deer in Unit 6.

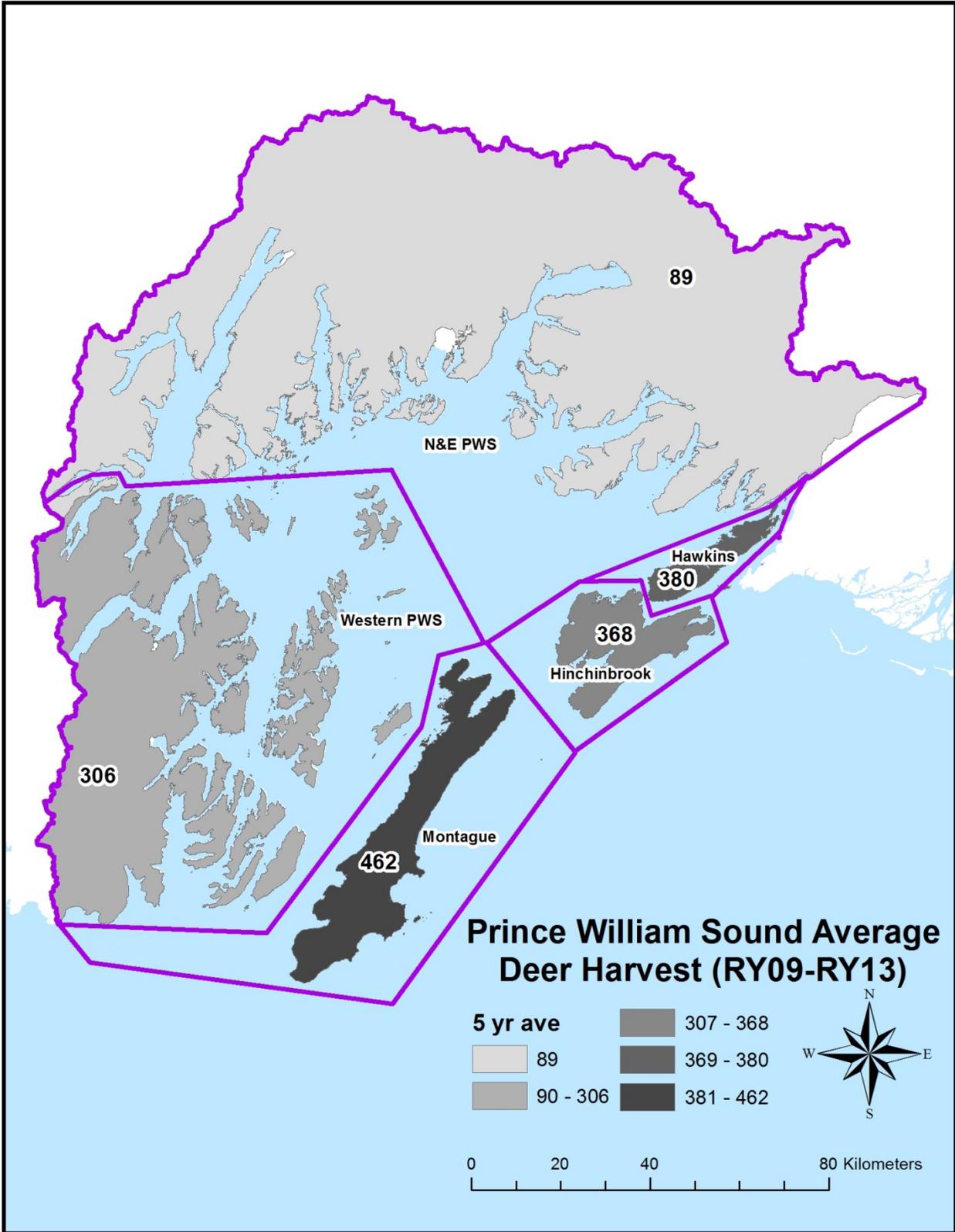


Figure 2. Average deer harvest estimates by hunt area in Unit 6D, Prince William Sound.

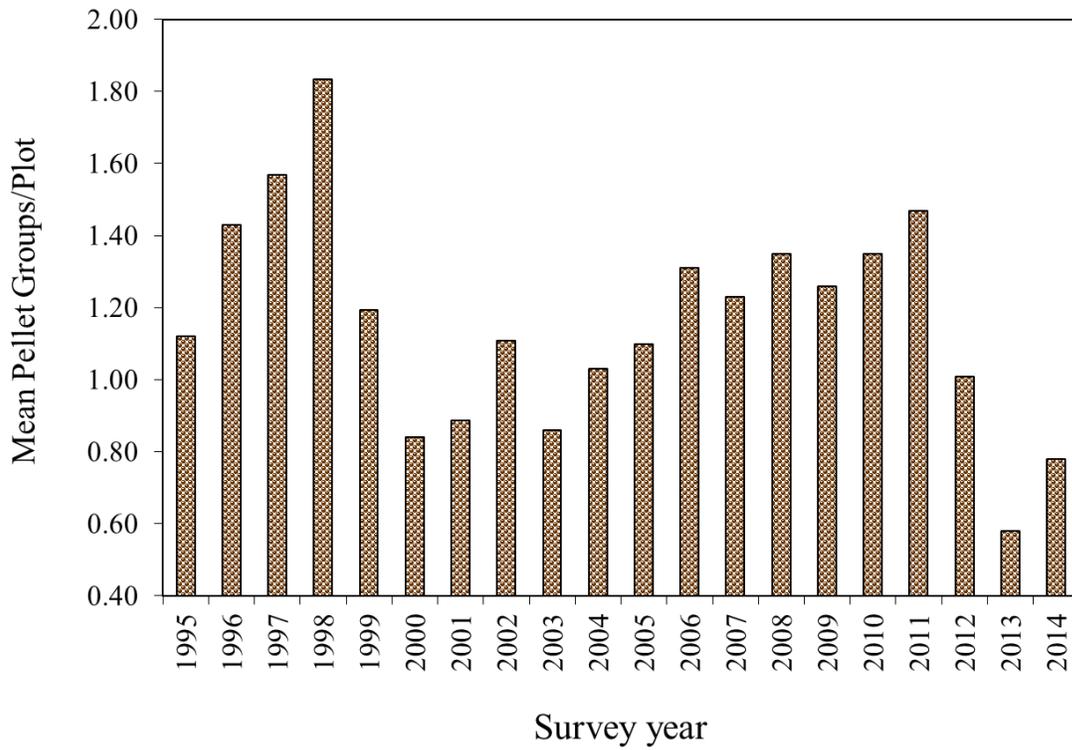


Figure 3. Deer pellet density observed in Unit 6D, Prince William Sound.

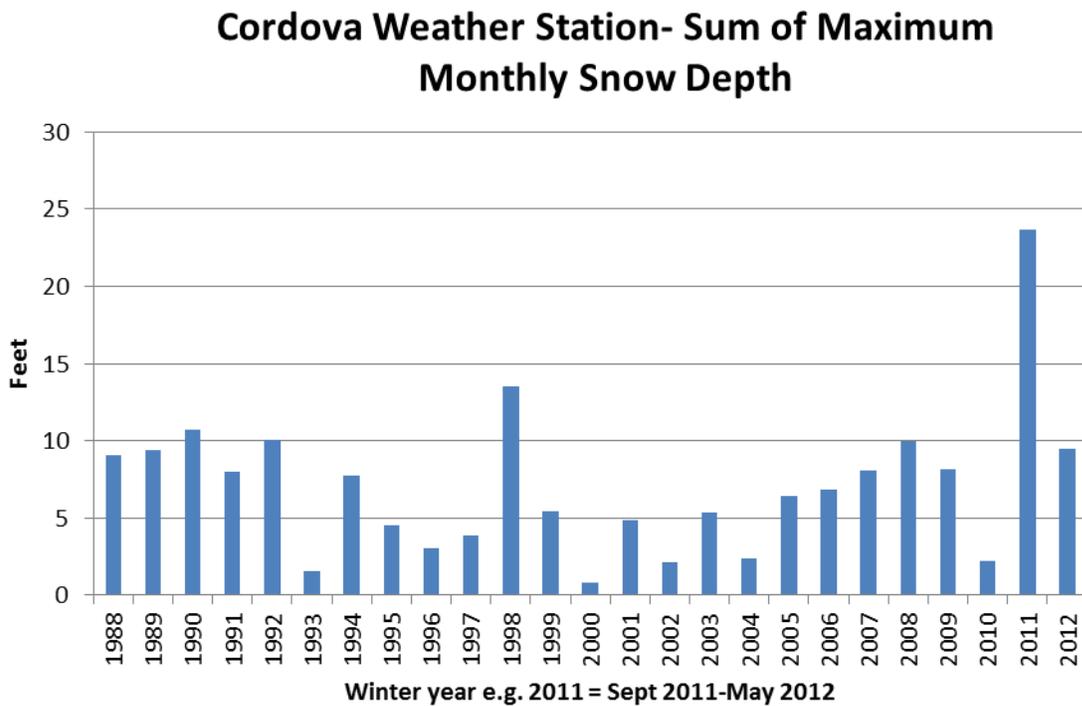


Figure 4. Weather data for Cordova in Prince William Sound.

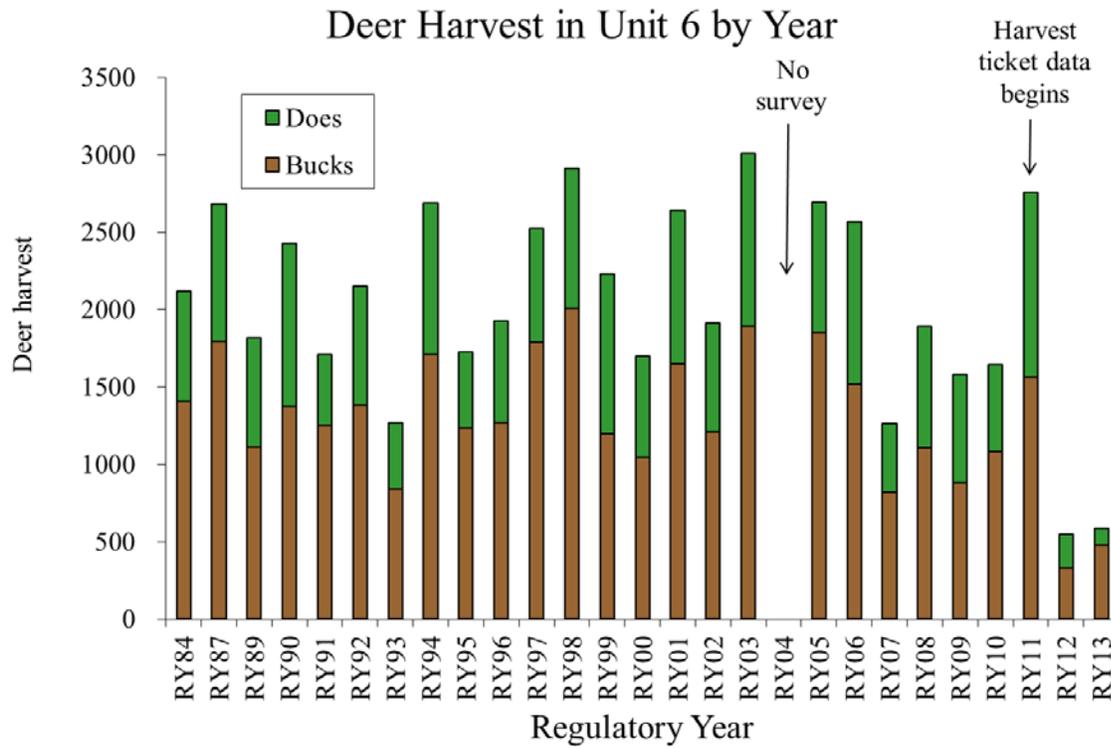


Figure 5. Estimated deer harvest in Unit 6D, Prince William Sound, regulatory years (RY) 1984–2013 A regulatory year runs from 1 July through 30 June (e.g., RY13 = 1 July 2013–30 June 2014).

Table 1. Unit 6 deer population trends as indicated by spring pellet-group surveys 2010–2014.

Area	Specific location/ UCU	Survey year	MPGP ^a	95% CI ^b	Number of plots
Knight Island	Bay of Isles 1503	2010	0.27	0.17-0.38	175
		2011	No survey		
		2012	0.28	0.17-0.39	164
		2013	0.18	0.09-0.28	174
		2014	0.31	0.17-0.44	176
Naked Island	1701	2010	0.51	0.36-0.67	210
		2011	0.51	0.36-0.66	177
		2012	0.56	0.37-0.75	187
		2013	0.23	0.11-0.34	203
		2014	0.43	0.32-0.55	210
Montague Island	Rocky Bay 1803	2010	0.67	0.48-0.86	212
		2011	No survey		
		2012	0.76	0.54-0.99	217
		2013	0.31	0.20-0.42	218
		2014	0.74	0.57-0.92	218
	San Juan Bay 1810	2010	No survey		
		2011	0.96	0.77-1.15	234
		2012	No survey		
		2013	0.59	0.43-0.75	234
		2014	0.43	0.30-0.55	214
Hinchinbrook Island	Port Etches 1903	2010	0.92	0.75-1.09	242
		2011	No survey		
		2012	1.38	1.10-1.65	193
		2013	0.67	0.51-0.83	225
		2014	1.16	0.92-1.39	243
	Hook Point 1905	2010	1.47	1.23-1.72	234
		2011	2.37	1.84-2.89	63
		2012	1.29	1.02-1.56	206
		2013	1.01	0.81-1.22	221
		2014	1.27	1.06-1.48	239

Table continues next page

Area	Specific location/ UCU	Survey year	MPGP ^a	95%CI. ^b	Number of plots
Hawkins Island	NE Hawkins 2001	2010	1.69	1.42-1.96	227
		2011	2.00	1.69-2.32	236
		2012	1.41	1.11-1.72	211
		2013	1.00	0.76-1.23	223
		2014	1.04	0.83-1.24	240
	SW Hawkins 2003	2010	1.11	0.86-1.35	157
		2011	1.95	1.60-2.30	217
		2012	1.33	1.00-1.66	141
		2013	0.54	0.39-0.68	216
		2014	0.67	0.50-0.84	222
All Areas		2010	0.98	0.89-1.06	1,457
		2011	1.47	1.33-1.61	927
		2012	1.01	0.91-1.11	1,319
		2013	0.58	0.52-0.64	1,714
		2014	0.78	0.72-0.85	1,762

^a Mean number of pellet groups per plot.

^b 95% Confidence Interval

Table 2. Unit 6 deer harvest, RY09–RY13.

Area	Regulatory ^a year	Estimated legal harvest ^b				Total	Estimated illegal/unrecovered	
		M	(%)	F	(%)		Harvest ^c	Total
Hawkins Island	RY09	216	(60)	143	(40)	359	54	413
	RY10	236	(75)	78	(25)	314	47	361
	RY11	461	(54)	389	(46)	850	128	978
	RY12	33	(70)	14	(30)	47	7	54
	RY13	73	(88)	10	(12)	83	12	95
Hinchinbrook Island	RY09	206	(60)	140	(40)	346	52	398
	RY10	314	(69)	140	(31)	454	68	522
	RY11	351	(61)	222	(39)	573	86	659
	RY12	63	(58)	45	(42)	108	16	124
	RY13	106	(91)	11	(9)	117	18	135
Montague Island	RY09	196	(52)	180	(48)	376	56	432
	RY10	303	(60)	206	(40)	509	76	585
	RY11	384	(56)	304	(44)	688	103	791
	RY12	149	(59)	103	(41)	252	38	290
	RY13	143	(78)	41	(22)	184	28	212
Western PWS	RY09	164	(49)	170	(51)	334	50	384
	RY10	185	(63)	108	(37)	293	44	337
	RY11	251	(55)	202	(45)	453	68	521
	RY12	56	(57)	43	(43)	99	15	114
	RY13	108	(71)	44	(29)	152	23	175
Northern and Eastern PWS	RY09	92	(71)	37	(29)	129	19	148
	RY10	36	(54)	31	(46)	67	10	77
	RY11	77	(56)	61	(44)	138	21	159
	RY12	26	(81)	6	(19)	32	5	37
	RY13	21	(91)	2	(9)	23	3	26
Unit 6 Unknown	RY09	7	(19)	29	(81)	36	5	41
	RY10	8	(100)	0	(0)	8	1	9
	RY11	39	(74)	14	(26)	53	8	61
	RY12	6	(60)	4	(40)	10	2	12
	RY13	26	(96)	1	(4)	27	4	31
Unit 6 - Total	RY09	881	(56)	699	(44)	1,580	237	1,817
	RY10	1,082	(66)	563	(34)	1,645	247	1,892
	RY11	1,563	(57)	1,192	(43)	2,755	413	3,168
	RY12	333	(61)	215	(39)	548	82	630
	RY13	477	(81)	109	(19)	586	88	674

^a A regulatory year (RY) runs from 1 July through 30 June (e.g., RY13 = 1 July 2013–30 June 2014).

^b From Deer Hunter Questionnaire Survey for all years until RY11 when harvest ticket data collection began.

^c Unquantified, but estimated to be 15% of reported total. Calculated total unit estimate of illegal kill, and therefore also total harvest may not exactly equal the total of individual units added together, due to rounding.

Table 3. Unit 6 deer hunter residency and success, regulatory years^a 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Successful					Unsuccessful					Total hunters
	Local Resident ^b	Nonlocal resident	Non-resident	Total	(%)	Local resident	Nonlocal resident	Non-resident	Total	(%)	
RY09	212	357	22	591	(46)	143	494	61	698	(54)	1,289
RY10	262	345	25	632	(53)	90	430	35	555	(47)	1,187
RY11	368	570	27	965	(68)	87	339	22	448	(32)	1,413
RY12	77	198	12	287	(33)	119	418	38	575	(67)	862
RY13	106	172	3	281	(37)	99	343	35	477	(63)	758

^a A regulatory year runs from 1 July through 30 June (e.g., RY13 = 1 July 2013–30 June 2014).

^b Resident of Unit 6.

Table 4. Unit 6 deer harvest chronology percent by month, regulatory years^a 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Harvest periods						Unk	<i>n</i>
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec			
RY09	11	6	29	35	18	0	1,582	
RY10	8	8	19	35	27	1	1,644	
RY11	4	2	20	37	24	13	2,745	
RY12	10	3	30	37	20	0	542	
RY13	11	5	34	23	26	0	575	

^a A regulatory year runs from 1 July through 30 June (e.g., RY13 = 1 July 2013–30 June 2014).

Table 5. Unit 6 deer harvest percent by transport method, regulatory years^a 2009–2013.

Regulatory year	Percent of harvest						<i>n</i>
	Airplane	Boat	3- and 4-wheeler	Highway vehicle	Foot	Unknown	
RY09	14	81	0	1	2	2	1,545
RY10	11	84	0	1	2	1	1,636
RY11	11	84	0	0	0	4	2,730
RY12	29	68	1	0	1	1	538
RY13	18	80	1	0	0	1	570

^a A regulatory year runs from 1 July through 30 June (e.g., RY13 = 1 July 2013–30 June 2014).