

# HUNTING NEWS



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# ANOTHER EXCITING SEASON ON THE CARDS

It's pitch black, the mercury is at  $-1^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the truck window is iced up so bad even warm water thrown over re-freezes, and the frigid air stings your face and lungs with every breath... And yet, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – you would rather be doing, and certainly nowhere you'd rather be going. You wouldn't trade this for the world!

Some people consider us crazy. Some just can't understand. Trading precious sleep, and the warmth and comfort of a cosy bed, to sit in a swamp on a dark and bone-chilling May morning. Why do we do it? Simple: Passion. Tradition. Mates. The excitement of the first whistling wings and cupped-up mallards kamikaze-ing into the decoy spread. And, importantly after the last year, freedom.

It's hard to comprehend the predicament we were in a year ago, in the chaos of Covid-19 and the inconsistencies around what activities were deemed safe under different alert levels, and those that weren't. For the first time in recent memory we were steering down the barrel of no Opening or, worse, possibly no game bird hunting season at all.

After a significant delay to the start of the season, and much behind the scenes lobbying by Fish & Game staff, we got there in end.

And despite that period of tension, anguish and apprehension, what a season it turned out to be. Bird numbers were, without doubt, up on the previous year and hunters (seemingly appreciating their new-found freedom) made the most of the opportunity by getting out significantly more often than in previous years and reaping the rewards of doing so.

In line with our long-term observations, the mallard population was trending up in 2020 and it looks very likely that will continue again this season, with even more ducks for hunters come Opening Day.

More ducks last season equates to more breeding and more ducklings fledging to young adults for 2021. Ideal breeding conditions and an abundant feed supply at that crucial time of year has also played a part in boosting mallard numbers. A very wet spring and consistent, almost weekly, rainfall during summer (even in the normally dry eastern part of the Wellington Fish & Game region) has been a boon for waterfowl and brood rearing. The Manawatu River is holding excellent numbers of mallards, and the abundance of ponds and cropping again keeping the ducks resident. And while the high country has been dry over summer, rain has now replenished ponds.

Wairarapa appears to have held birds throughout summer with the lake consistently high from rainfall in the ranges and southerly swells blocking the Lake Onoke outlet. Combined with the reintroduction of pea cropping after several years hiatus due to the pea weevil outbreak, and odds are on more birds having stayed put in the region than flying off chasing the southern crop harvest.

The stars have aligned for a stellar season in 2021, and we're predicting the best duck numbers seen in a decade. Make sure you're part of the action that's in store... and enjoy your freedom to hunt this season!

## 2021 REGS AT A GLANCE

Opening Day – **Saturday, May 1, 2021**

Waterfowl Season Ends – **Sunday, June 27, 2021**


Game Season Ends – **August 29, 2021**

10 Grey/Mallard Ducks per hunter per day

10 Paradise shelduck per hunter per day

5 Black Swan (May 1 and May 2, 2021)

3 Black Swan (May 3 to 27 June, 2021)



## GRAB YOUR LICENCE ONLINE

The fastest, easiest way to grab your licence if you haven't already got one is to do it online. Just jump on [www.fishandgame.org.nz](http://www.fishandgame.org.nz) and click the prominent licence tab at the top of the home page. Simple as that!

# BONUS BAG LIMIT ON SWANS

Photo: Andrew Harding



Nothing beats swan and parrie sausages fried up in the maimai.  
Photo: Hamish Carnachan

Wellington Fish & Game region hunters have been given a bonus limit of five swans per hunter per day for Opening Weekend this season. The increase in bag limit for black swans for Opening Weekend only is a measure brought in to try and limit the amount of pasture and crop damage the birds are doing in some parts of the region, particularly adjacent to the shoreline of Lake Wairarapa.

While the population largely remains stable, Wellington Fish & Game has received an increasing number of concerns about the birds and we'd rather see hunters harvest and disperse them during the season than have to issue bird disturbance permits throughout the year. The black swan is a majestic game bird that, despite their lumbering appearance in flight, move as fast as mallards and can be equally as challenging to hunt.

And while mallards will often stop flying when conditions are calm – like we often get at the start of May – swan will move throughout the day, ensuring there are always opportunities for hunters. Hence, the bigger bag limit means more chances for a shot this Opening Weekend.

Some hunters turn their noses up at swan, suggesting it isn't a good table bird. That's a matter of personal opinion, however, swan meat is a welcome addition to any game sausage and blends well with any of venison, pork or parrie meat. It also makes an excellent addition to salami which can be put on pizza or diced through pasta!

So, this season, when swans come over your maimai or pass low to inspect your decoys, don't pass up the shot... or the opportunity for some delicious free-range meat.

*The five-swan daily bag limit only applies to Opening Weekend, after which it returns to three birds per hunter per day.*

Get some mates together and get your eye in before the season starts. Photo: Hamish Carnachan



This Wairarapa forestry block will hopefully be open for pheasant hunting this season. Photo: Hamish Carnachan



## NEW UPLAND GAME OPPORTUNITIES

Wellington Fish & Game has been working with New Zealand Forest Enterprises Ltd (NZFE) investigating upland game hunting opportunities on their land in Wairarapa. One site has been selected for a trial period of managed access hunting with the details and memorandum of understanding currently being worked out between Fish & Game and NZFE.

The site chosen has a very good population of California quail, and staff have bolstered wild pheasant numbers with releases. If you're interested in chasing Wairarapa hill country roosters this season, please get in touch: [wellington@fishandgame.org.nz](mailto:wellington@fishandgame.org.nz)



When it comes to pre-season prep, you really can't (and shouldn't) go past an eye-opener shoot to get rid of the cobwebs from your shotgun shooting.

For most, shotgun shooting is confined to a small part of the year, the main waterfowl season or, for many, even just Opening Weekend. As such, responsible hunters should be looking to re-hone shot-gunning skills before the season starts so birds are put down fast and humanely.

This can only be done if your swing and your lead is good, and that takes practice! Many clubs, right around the region, offer organised eye-opener shooting events some weeks before the season starts. If you can't make these, or you're worried about the expense, grab a cheap hand thrower (around \$25 from most good outdoor stores), a box of clays and your shooting buddy and head out to the farm to bust some targets.

I was initially skeptical about hand throwers until I'd seen one in action – they launch clays very efficiently, with little effort. And, unlike mechanical throwers, they operator can fire them in an array of arcs far more variably than an automatic launcher, thereby giving the shooter a much more realistic field shooting experience.

Clay shooting doesn't have to cost the earth, it is seriously good fun and a great way of bringing your shooting mates together and start building on the anticipation and excitement ahead of the season.

Grab a thrower and a box of clays and bust some targets before May 1.

Do not overlook your dog's fitness and obedience in preparing for the season ahead. Photo: Hamish Carnachan.



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-SEASON PREP

Okay, duck hunting is far removed from top-tier sport. However, just as athletes diligently train for 'game day', there's plenty hunters can do to be in top shape when the season rolls around. We're not talking physical condition here, rather, making sure your equipment is functioning well, your gear is in good order, and you're not working your gun dog in often cold and wet conditions straight out of the blocks.

Many hunters will go through the machinations of scrubbing up the maimai and running any necessary repairs, touch-painting or replacing decoys, servicing the faithful old shotty, and even filling the waders with water to test for leaks.

These are all good practices to make for a good (and comfortable) start to the season. But one area of preparation often overlooked is making sure the dog is 'match fit'.

A dog that spends 99 per cent of its time as a family pet and is dragged out hunting for just one weekend of the year is going to have about as much fun as a couch-potato forced into half a marathon without any training. This will ultimately have a negative impact on the animal's enjoyment of hunting, and even lead to bad habits. Because your gun dog is going to be doing most of the work once you're in the maimai, they need to be fit. This means regular long walks several weeks out from

Opening and a swimming regime too.

Don't discount the benefit of a simple retrieving refresher either. A dog that hasn't been in action for most of the year could easily have forgotten simple commands and could even break on the shot. On that note, it's also a good idea to refamiliarise your dog with gunshots. And as with any preparation, whether it's getting the dog into shape or maintenance on the duck hunting hardware, the key is not to leave it to the last minute. Last-minute Larry's run the risk of forgetting something crucial on Opening morning, experiencing gear failure during the season, or scaring birds away because they left maimai upkeep too late.



Introduce someone new to hunting this season - help strengthen our pursuit



## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

'Cancel culture' is a term that has emerged recently to describe the rewriting of history to serve a certain viewpoint and/or ignore traditions and philosophies that have fallen out of favour, often invoked for political expediency.

It appears duck hunting is not immune to this worrying new movement. Fish & Game staff are increasingly noticing that the pursuit of duck hunting is being marginalised by the powers that be, with our lengthy, multi-generational culture and contribution to the environment being intentionally overlooked.

What this means is that hunters need to stick together, and we need to show strength in numbers. This season we encourage you to help grow duck hunting participation by introducing someone new to the pursuit. Take a child, or a spouse or friend out for a hunt; introduce them to our culture and boost our representation. Get involved in advocating for the pursuit, encourage your hunting mates to play a part too. Fish & Game can only do so much; collectively, though, we have a much stronger voice to ensure our long and proud tradition is not forgotten or lost to the latest fad.

If you'd like some help or advice on how to introduce new hunters to the pursuit, please get in touch with us: [wellington@fishandgame.org.nz](mailto:wellington@fishandgame.org.nz). Alternatively, scan the QR code above.

## HELP SHAPE THE FUTURE OF HUNTING

Fish & Game elections are being held this year so make sure you register to vote when you buy your licence, and even consider standing for the Wellington Fish & Game Council. The system of hunters and anglers managing their own affairs is unique in the world of wildlife management and is one of the key reasons why Fish & Game regions have been extremely successful in fulfilling their legislative and regulatory mandate, as well as delivering outcomes for recreational hunters for the past 30 years.

Elected councillors ensure regional decisions match hunter and angler expectation and aspirations at a local level. The system is far more favourable than having a centralised bureaucracy dictating terms from a Wellington CBD high-rise as it ensures licence holders have a sense of belonging and influence in their own local affairs. Hunters on council representing hunters is the ultimate example of user-pays, user-says. Get involved. Vote; stand for council in 2021.



Fish & Game staff removing rubbish from the shoreline of Lake Wairarapa. Photo: Hamish Camachan.

# LEADING THE WAY IN WAIRARAPA WETLANDS

Fish & Game staff and local hunters are continuing to take a lead in helping maintain and conserve the magnificent Wairarapa wetlands – the duck hunting mecca of the North Island – and the wildlife within. The lake and wetland habitat of the lagoons along the eastern shoreline largely remain thanks to the efforts of hunters. In the 1980s, they fought to stop the area being drained by the predecessor to Greater Wellington Regional Council and won protection over the area via a Water Conservation Order (WCO).

While the WCO and hunting heritage are increasingly being overlooked in the ongoing management of Wairarapa Moana, Fish & Game and game bird licence holders continue to take one of the more active roles in on-the-ground, conservation work in the area. In the lead up to this season, staff and hunters have been removing derelict maimais, educating hunters on the requirements for standholders, and conducting regular shoreline rubbish cleanups.

“Over summer and autumn, we’ve removed around 15 cubic metres of rubbish that has washed up along the lake edge or wetland margins,” says Wellington Fish & Game senior officer Dr Matt Kavermann.

Staff have also been advising and assisting hunters with predator control programmes in and around the stands they hunt from. “Hunters are the single largest recreational user group of Wairarapa Moana,” says Dr Kavermann. “They visit the most isolated parts of the lake and wetland systems and that puts them in an ideal position to make a good dent in predator numbers and a real impact on conservation efforts in the area.”



Wetland projects assisted by the Game Bird Habitat Trust could be eligible for planting grants. Photo: Hamish Camachan.

## BE A RESPONSIBLE HUNTER

Being able to hunt waterfowl on public land is a privilege, not a right. If we fail to remember that, then we run the real risk of losing the hunting access we enjoy today. It is up to all of us to continue to lift our game and present ourselves to the public as responsible users of the public places where we are permitted to shoot.

Some members of the public are looking for any opportunity to show duck hunters and hunting in bad light – ensure they don’t get that chance. If you see a hunter behaving in an inappropriate manner, call them out. Failing that, call Fish & Game or the Police.

In our experience, over many years ranging and interacting with our licence holders, 99 per cent are great sports and very respectful. Unfortunately, it is the other 1 per cent who risk letting everyone down. Take a zero-tolerance approach to this minority.

As always, this season please remember that other people may use the places where you hunt – remove all your rubbish, including shells and any wads you retrieve, and always treat other wetland users with respect and courtesy.



## BIG BOOST FOR WATERFOWL HABITAT

Wetlands throughout the country will benefit from the Government’s ‘One Billion Trees’ programme which will be used to enhance habitat for wildlife and help offset carbon emissions. The NZ Game Bird Habitat Trust (GBHT) has been granted \$360,000 over three years to establish plantings on projects the trust supports around New Zealand.

Wellington Fish & Game senior field officer Dr Matt Kavermann worked with Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to secure the funding for the GBHT to disburse. “There are multiple benefits that will come from this project,” says Dr Kavermann. “Improving water quality and natural resources, increasing biodiversity, and helping out with meeting New Zealand’s climate change commitments.”

GBHT chairman Andy Tannock says the grant is a significant boost for wetland habitat projects and complements the Trust’s goals. “People are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits wetlands provide through habitat for wildlife, water-quality management, flood mitigation, aesthetics and recreational harvest opportunity,” he says. “Clearly MPI sees similar benefits.”

GBHT is funded by a contribution from every game bird hunting licence sold, with funds used to enhance game bird habitat. The trust has funded over \$2 million worth of projects since 1993. Dr Kavermann says planting habitat margins of those wetlands created through GBHT funding will be a great outcome. The trust will set up a process to support the planting of natives like flaxes and woody species at sites that have received GBHT funding support.

Wetlands are some of the most threatened habitats in New Zealand with as little as just 2-3% of their original cover left in some regions. “Game bird hunters, through their contributions to the trust, are trying to turn the tide on the decline of these vitally important ecosystems,” says Dr Kavermann. Many wetland creation and restoration projects are taking place on private land.

# ENDANGERED EELS THRIVE IN HUNTER HABITAT

*Fish & Game officer Cohen Stewart with eels caught during sampling from a duck hunting pond*

New research shows habitat created by duck hunters is contributing towards the conservation of one of our iconic and most at risk species – the longfin eel – and supporting healthy populations of other native species too. A study by Fish & Game, recently published in the *NZ Journal of Zoology*, shows duck ponds created by hunters and farmers are likely supporting hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of eels throughout the country.

Fish & Game officer Cohen Stewart, who led the research project in Southland, says while hunters have long understood the wider benefits to wildlife from the ponds they create, this is the first time their contribution to conservation has been quantified. There are around 7000 duck ponds on farms in Southland. From our research and sampling we estimate that these support around 36,000 shortfin eels and 60,000 longfin eels.

“With over 45,000 duck hunters in New Zealand, many of whom have built duck ponds from scratch, or enhance and maintain wetland habitat through planting and predator trapping, you can see that their impact on the preservation of eel populations and other native aquatic fish and bird species is immense. While Stewart says it is no surprise eels use hunter-created habitat, the sheer number of longfins and shortfins they found inhabiting the ponds is “staggering”.

“On average, each duck pond we studied supported 16 shortfins weighing 10kg and 10 mature longfin eel weighing over 9kg. These are breeding female fish, vital to the continuation of the species. The data we’ve collected really does support the notion of duck hunters being ‘accidental conservationists’. Imagine the plight of tuna if it weren’t for hunters and farmers creating and protecting these wetland areas.”

Mr Stewart points out that Fish & Game has been the lead agency for wetland conservation and creation for decades – efforts that often go unheralded. “Given the significant loss of wetland habitat nationally, the wetlands that hunters are reinstating and protecting is extremely significant.”



## LAKE WAIRARAPA CAT COMP

Many hunters will have seen the traps in and around the Lake Wairarapa wetlands present to control mammalian predators in the area. These efforts have focused largely on mustelids (stoats, ferrets and weasels), rodents and hedgehogs, however, recent monitoring by Fish & Game has shown that significant numbers of feral cats also exist.

These species are highly efficient hunters and are known to target all kinds of wildlife with research showing they will kill as many waterfowl in a year as hunters harvest in a season. Unfortunately, the existing trapping appears ineffective against a proportion of the feral cat population that need additional and alternative control. So, this season, hunters are encouraged to do their bit for conservation and help with predator control in the Wairarapa wetlands.

Any hunter licenced in the Wellington Fish & Game region who submits a photo of a feral cat that have culled will go into the draw for a six-pack of Avian X decoys. The entry must contain details of when and where it was killed. To be eligible for the prize, you must submit your entry photo by 9am, Monday, June 28. Email your photo to [mkavermann@fishandgame.org.nz](mailto:mkavermann@fishandgame.org.nz)

The Wellington Fish and Game Council emphasise that controlling feral cats must be done in a humane manner.

*Hunters are being encouraged to cull as many feral cats as they can this season. Photo: Hamish Carnachan*



*Manawatu farmer Simon Walker and Fish & Game's Matt Kavermann survey a newly created pond on Walker's property. Photo: Hamish Carnachan*



## NEED HELP WITH A WETLAND?

Wellington Fish & Game staff enjoy nothing more than helping landowners turn their duck pond dreams into reality. If you need help with a wetland development, funding and grant application assistance, or just want some advice on how to improve an existing pond, please get in touch.

In fact, for anything wetland related, be it guidance on whether that unproductive boggy corner of the farm could make a good pond, or if you want to pick our brains on predator control programmes, we're here to help.

Please contact our field officers – Hamish in Wairarapa (021994768) or Matt in Manawatu (021688346).

# EYE IN THE SKY

Many hunters could be inadvertently giving the game away with poorly constructed or considered maimai design. Over the course of many days ranging and visiting all manner of maimais and stands, staff get to see it all. From excellent hides that are almost impossible to find, to absolute disasters that no duck is ever going to approach.

Most hunters do a great job camouflaging the fronts and sides of their maimai but often fail to consider overhead cover.

Consider the image above. While it is well brushed up on the sides, that isn't how a duck is going to view the scene as it circles the decoy spread. Indeed, ducks can easily see right down into the maimai and, even though hunters will be camouflaged during the season, the slightest movement from inside is going to make the birds disappear.

Overhead cover becomes even more important later in the season as wary ducks will invariably approach a pond or decoy spread from much higher, and they will likely make several passes to check all is well and safe. So, the key is to ensure you have some overhead cover, even just a corner you can tuck yourself into, and stay as still as possible.

The temptation is always to try and sneak a peak to see if the ducks are still circling when they're behind you and out of sight. Be patient, give them time to come back around – if you move, it will be a dead give away and game over.

## TOP TIPS FOR AFTER OPENING

Once the 'easy' ducks of Opening Weekend are behind you, it's time to mix up your hunting to ensure you keep bagging birds consistently throughout the season. I've found ducks are super wary of structure, even immediately after the first weekend flurry – they associate all but the most well disguised stand with danger. And the ducks only get wiser as the season progresses.

I seldom use maimais and stands after Opening, even during the foulest weather conditions, opting instead for natural cover. A good hide can be hastily and effectively constructed out of any natural material you find lying around your chosen site – think driftwood and lupin bush alongside lakes and rivers, willow branches and raupo in wetland areas.

Remember that all important overhead cover. This can be achieved by tucking yourself back against a tree or swamp coprosma; willows are excellent because they have shed their foliage by winter allowing any approaching birds to be seen but still providing enough cover to break up the hunter's outline.

One of those small folding handsaws is indispensable and should be part of your hunting kit. With decoys, less is more mid- and late-season. A tactic shown to me by an excellent and very experienced waterfowl hunter is to simply have one spinning-wing decoy out. The trick is to have it slightly obscured so ducks attracted by the flash of the wing have to come in close to see whether it's another bird landing. Adopt these tactics after Opening and you can almost be guaranteed your success will increase as the season progresses.



*Natural cover is better than a stand or structure later in the season.  
Photo: Hamish Carnachan*



*Don't risk your firearms ownership, make sure you have your game licence when rangers come calling this season.  
Photo: Hamish Carnachan*

## DON'T RISK YOUR FIREARMS OWNERSHIP

We'd like to think that all enthusiastic duck hunters recognise the value of Fish & Game's management of the duck hunting resource, the advocacy we do on your behalf to keep hunting areas open and maintaining the tradition of game bird hunting in New Zealand - and that accordingly, you purchase a licence to support us. However, there are always a few who prefer to chance their arm, cheat the rest, and go without buying a licence. While these freeloaders probably think it is just a bit of mischief, Fish & Game is trying to get the message out about the significance of getting caught without a duck hunting licence.

We have been advised by the NZ Police that if you are prosecuted for an offence under the Wildlife Act – such as hunting without a licence – you are likely to fail the 'Fit and Proper Person' requirement when it comes to having your firearms licence renewed. So, if you have a mate that you suspect hunts without a licence, perhaps give them a bit of a prod to not risk their future access to all firearms. Wellington Fish & Game has a strong and active compliance team, often accompanied by police officers, so expect to see us whether you hunt private or public water.



# WORKING HARD FOR OUR HUNTERS

Here's a short summary of the work we're doing on behalf of Wellington Fish & Game hunting licence holders:

## **SPECIES MONITORING** – *Counting the birds*

Each year we carry out intensive aerial and ground monitoring of mallard, paradise shelduck, black swan, shoveler and pukeko populations. This year was the seventh year we've banded mallards. All this info helps set regulations to ensure viable populations of game birds now and into the future.

## **RESOURCE MANAGEMENT** – *Protecting wetlands and waterways*

We've continued to advocate strongly at regional council hearings for waterfowl and their habitat to protect the lower North Island's rivers and wetlands. Wellington Fish & Game also ensures the work we do on our own wetlands in the region is done in accordance with the RMA.

## **WETLAND DEVELOPMENT** – *Creating habitat*

We continue to oversee a number of projects funded by the Game Bird Habitat Trust (GBHT), and Wellington Fish & Game love helping landowners undertaking their own pond development projects. If you need help or funding advice for your wetland project, call Matt for Manawatu or Hamish for Wairarapa on (06)3590409.

## **ACCESS** – *Maintaining hunter access*

Ensuring ongoing access to the waterfowling resource is an increasingly demanding area. We've specifically requested the NZ Fish & Game Council investigate options – political, legal and social – for maintaining perpetual and uninterrupted access for licence holders and the general public to game bird hunting locations. We're also working directly with landowners and have negotiated access for upland game bird hunting.

## **INFORMATION TO LICENCE HOLDERS** – *Keeping you informed*

We want to ensure you get the best bang for your buck out of your investment in a licence. This newsletter is intended to provide information, updates and hunting tips, our Weekly Hunting Reports runs throughout the season, and we're now on Instagram to give you the latest weather updates and happenings from around the region.

## **ADVOCACY** – *Working in and with other agencies*

Fish & Game continues to work with DOC, regional councils, and community groups to ensure hunters' interests are protected. We are actively engaged with iwi to ensure that hunter access to lakes and wetlands continues amid Treaty settlements. Regional staff worked tirelessly through Covid advocating waterfowl hunting as a safe pursuit that should be permitted, and pushed hard for a season once lockdown was lifted.

## **COMPLIANCE** – *Keeping everyone honest*

Our 35 warranted rangers are active throughout the Wellington Fish & Game region – checking licences, bag limits and compliance with the regulations. Most hunters expect to see us Opening Weekend but we're actively ranging throughout the season.

## GET YOUR BANDS IN

Don't forget to get those band details back to us. Photo: Hamish Carnachan

Want to do your part to help manage and improve the mallard population in the lower North Island? Then get the details of any banded birds you've harvested shot back to us. Those little steel rings hanging around your caller lanyard contain really important information for us to help ensure sustainable populations of mallards are around well into the future.

We know hunters like to keep bands as a memento or 'trophy' – that's fine, we just want to get some basic info off you such as where and when you shot the bird carrying that precious metal. Even if you've got old bands, we want to hear from you. Contact us at [wellington@fishandgame.org.nz](mailto:wellington@fishandgame.org.nz) or phone the office on (06)3590409.



## KEEP IN TOUCH

We're now on Instagram! If you'd like to keep up to date with all the hunting happenings in the lower North Island, and catch up with what the staff are out and about doing, check us out at [wellingtonfishgame](https://www.instagram.com/wellingtonfishgame).

And if you're not yet receiving our Weekly Hunting Report, with all the weather updates and conditions from wetlands and waterfowling hotspots around our region, then ask to sign up by emailing us: [wellington@fishandgame.org.nz](mailto:wellington@fishandgame.org.nz). Staff love to hear from hunters so please keep in touch.



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