



GMU 23

Feb. 12, 2024

Species within this unit:

Black bear, elk, javelina, Merriam's turkey, mountain lion, mule deer, white-tailed deer, band-tailed pigeon, dove, tree squirrel, quail

Unit Boundaries

Beginning at the confluence of Tonto Creek and the Salt River; northerly along Tonto Creek to the spring box, north of the Tonto Creek Hatchery, on Tonto Creek; northeasterly along the east fork of Tonto Creek to the Tonto-Sitgreaves National Forest boundary along the Mogollon Rim; east along this boundary to the Fort Apache Indian Reservation boundary; southerly along the reservation boundary to the Salt River; westerly along the Salt River to Tonto Creek.

Species Information

Black Bear

Hunt Structure: Game Management Unit 23 is divided into a northern and southern management zone to allow for separate female harvest objectives. The two halves have different starting dates for the spring and fall seasons, so be sure to check when each hunt opens. See the hunting regulations booklet for the definitions of the north and south half boundaries.



The season dates are valid only until the female harvest objective is reached, after which time the season closes at sundown on the Wednesday immediately following. Hunters are responsible for checking to see if the hunt is still ongoing before they go afield. Season status must be checked by calling 1-800-970-BEAR (2327). Hunters are also required to contact the Arizona Game & Fish Department in person, online or by phone at the same number within 48 hours after taking a bear. In addition, a premolar tooth from each bear taken must be received in the Phoenix office of the Arizona Game & Fish Department within 10 days after contacting the Department.

Overview: Black bears are primarily associated with the chaparral, pine-oak woodlands, and the pine/mixed conifer habitat types. During some years, black bears can be located in the desert scrub habitat where thick stands of prickly pear cactus are found. Prickly pear flats can often provide excellent glassing and stalking opportunities for bear hunters. Look for prickly pear flats that extend up brushy slopes. This situation provides bears with good feeding sites adjacent to cover to retire to. Later in the fall, Gambel oak thickets (in years with good acorn production) are places to check. Glassing oak thickets is much more difficult and the use of predator calls can enhance your probability of success. Try hunting both high and low elevation types of habitat if you are having trouble locating bears in one or the other. Predator calling in an area where there is bear sign can be productive also.

Areas: The entire Sierra Ancha Mountain range and its drainages are good bear habitat. A few spots to mention are Cherry Creek, Coon Creek, Salome Creek, Lambing Creek and Picture Mountain. Bears can be taken in the pine/mixed conifer areas in the North Hunt Unit along the Naegelin Rim and the Fort Apache Indian Reservation Boundary.

Tips: Black bears, more than any other big game species in Arizona must be hunted early in the morning or late afternoon during the early fall hunts, if the hunter is to have an opportunity to locate the animals. Scouting prospective areas helps greatly and the use of binoculars and/or a spotting scope is almost mandatory. To judge a bear, look at body bulk and relative size of legs to the body and the ear size relative to the head. A bear with long -lanky looking legs is a good indicator of a young smaller bear. A bear with small appearing ears is a good indicator for a larger bear since bears' ears (young and old) are generally about 5 inches long. Hence the smaller the ears appear in relation to the head, the bigger the bear's head, which probably means a bigger bear.



Elk

Overview: Elk herds in Unit 23 are stable. There have been years of above average precipitation and snow fall as well as years of severe drought and below average precipitation. Habitat conditions are good.

Bull elk in Unit 23 are managed for older age class bulls resulting in higher bull to cow ratios as well as higher calve to cow ratios. Hunters are encouraged to participate in donating an incisor tooth sample from their harvested bulls to assist our department in managing for older age class bulls.

Elk activity is dictated by temperatures with elk being more mobile during the cooler times of the day. This is especially true during the early hunt when days are usually quite warm. Elk are very vocal animals during the early hunts, so herds can be located at all hours using various calling techniques. During the warmer times of the day this allows the hunter to stalk animals which are bedded down. Being familiar with calls and studying various videotapes on elk hunting will help a hunter become more successful.

Areas: Depending on which hunt you are hunting, areas differ. During the early bull hunt, if you have a north permit, your hunt will concentrate on the extreme northern portion of the unit. Areas to scout include Canyon Creek, Colcord Mountain, Naegelin Canyon, Turkey Peak, and Christopher Mountain. These areas all offer good elk hunting opportunities. If you have a south permit, your scouting will be centered on the Sierra Ancha Mountains. Areas to scout will include Workman Creek, Reynolds Creek, Armer Mountain, and Sawmill Flat.

During the general antlerless hunt in late October, hunters can look into the same areas in both the north and south units, as the bulls will generally still be bugling, though to a lesser degree than in early October. Elk will be found from the Mogollon Rim south to Parker Creek. This is a large area, so scouting will be beneficial. Areas to scout will include Canyon Creek, Naegelin Rim/Canyon, Christopher Mountain, Bottle Springs, Aztec Peak, and Armer Mountain.

By the time the archery hunts arrive, the weather should have cooled considerably, and the elk (especially bulls) will be heading into the brushy cover of the south slopes of the Naegelin Rim, Christopher Mountain, Horse Mountain, Oxbow Mountain, and Armer Mountain. Antlerless archery hunters will also find that cows will be widely scattered across areas mentioned earlier as opposed to the steeper brushier habitat types.



During the archery antlerless hunt in November, hunters can scout Christopher Mountain, Naegelin Rim, Canyon Creek, Young's Landing Strip, Buzzard Roost, and Armer Mountain areas.

The late bull hunt will have the bulls pushed into remote often rugged areas of the Unit. These areas include Armer Mountain, the south slopes of Naegelin Rim, Christopher Mountain, Horse Mountain, and the Mogollon Rim.

TIPS: Scouting for the earlier hunts should begin soon after being drawn. Scouting for the later hunts should wait until elk begin their seasonal shifts, which occur after the weather changes and temperatures cool down significantly. There will be areas where elk are common in September, but are absent in December. Also, later hunts have seen an increase in the use of aircraft for scouting. There is a Game and Fish Commission Rule, as well as federal regulations, which prohibit the use of aircraft to take or pursue wildlife in Arizona.

Javelina

Overview: The Unit 23 javelina population is stable. As with other species the drought can have a negative impact on javelina populations. Look forward to years with good winter and summer rains as they should be favorable on the javelina populations.

Areas: Javelina are commonly found throughout the southern portion of Unit 23. The highest densities are located in the desert scrub communities north of Roosevelt Lake. Access to these areas from the north is F.S. road 71 out of Punkin Center. From the south end of the lake, go north on State Route 288 to F.S. road 60 (A-Cross Road). A-Cross runs between the foothills of the Sierra Ancha Mountains and the northern shore of Roosevelt Lake. The area offers good vehicle access to quality javelina habitat. Additionally, the area east of State Route 288 is easily accessed via F.S. road 203 (Cherry Creek road). This road accesses miles of quality javelina habitat between State Route 288 and Cherry Creek. If you're looking to get up a little higher in elevation, there are areas to the west of the town of Young that have javelina habitat and you can camp in the coolness of the pines close by.

Tips: Javelina are one of the smaller "big game" animals you will encounter in Arizona. They also blend in very well with the desert landscape. Therefore, it is important to spend more time on the seat of your pants glassing than tromping around the desert. Glass the sunny slopes in the morning, focusing on the slopes with prickly pear cactus. Javelina frequent these slopes and can be spotted much easier than in the brush.



Merriam's Turkey

Overview: Turkey numbers in Unit 23 fluctuate from year to year depending on a number of factors; most importantly is the poult hatch and survival up to the hunt. Turkeys are doing well in Unit 23.

Turkey hunting in the fall is a matter of locating a flock and breaking it up. Then, the turkeys can be called back to within shotgun range. This will usually occur within 5-10 minutes of breaking up the flock. Scouting prior to the season is recommended to locate areas of turkey concentrations. Turkey leave many signs that they are using an area. They leave large distinct tracks in soft dirt and mud, they drop feathers in dusting areas and beneath roosts, they scrape up pine needles and oak leaves in search of mast (seeds and acorns), and they leave distinct droppings in riparian and meadow areas where they have been feeding. Insects, especially grasshoppers, grass seeds, pine seeds, acorns, grass, and forbs are all turkey food. They prefer to feed in small openings of pine/oak woodlands, mixed conifer, or along the edge of meadows, and in riparian areas.

During the spring hunt turkeys can be located by imitating the call of a hen turkey. The males respond to these calls with a distinctive “gobble”. Hunters should be dressed in camouflage to blend in with the area they are hunting. Successful hunters tend to stay put when a turkey “gobbles” and let the turkey come to them. It is very difficult to stalk a turkey, whose keen eyesight is better than human eyesight. It can also be dangerous to stalk a turkey. Other hunters are in the woods dressed in camouflage as you are and they may be the “turkey” you are stalking. So it is better to stay where you are when you hear the “gobble” and find a good place that will act as a blind.

Areas: Turkey are found primarily in the pine, pine/oak, mixed conifer, and riparian areas of the unit. Areas to scout will include Canyon Creek, Naegelin Rim/Canyon, Colcord Mountain/Canyon, Christopher Mountain, Turkey Peak (Of Course!), Gentry Mountain, Young Airport, Squaw Mesa, Buzzard Roost, and along the Malicious Gap road (Forest Road 609).

Tips: Hunters should be proficient with turkey calling techniques. They can be learned through a number of sources including cassette tapes and videotapes. Turkey calling with a diaphragm call can be practiced while driving (preferably with no one else in the car) or doing many other activities since your hands are not needed. A responsible turkey hunter will not wear clothing that is red, white, or blue while hunting. These colors, when viewed through brush can look like a gobblers head and could cause another hunter to mistake you as the turkey.



Mountain Lion

Overview: Units 27 and 32 are the only units with a higher average harvest. The lion population in this unit appears to be stable.

****Note:** Mountain lion is now managed as separate zones within Arizona. GMU 23 is within Zone J and has been identified to limit the harvest objective to 48. Hunters are also required to contact the Arizona Game & Fish Department in person or by phone at the same number within 48 hours after taking a lion. In addition, a premolar tooth from each lion taken must be received in the Phoenix office of the Arizona Game & Fish Department within 10 days after contacting the Department.

Areas: Mountain lions are found throughout the unit wherever prey is plentiful. Prey species include elk, deer, domestic livestock, javelina, turkey, and other small game. Lions tend to inhabit rough areas such as canyon rims and bottoms. Lion tracks and sign can be located along forest roads and trails, as they seek easy walking when moving from location to location.

Tips: Many hunters use guides to hunt lions. If you use a guide be sure they are licensed with the state and that they have the proper permits for guiding on the Tonto National Forest. Check their references and you can call the Game and Fish department to verify their license and do the same with the Tonto National Forest.

Mule Deer

Areas: Mule deer numbers in Unit 23 are stable. Mule deer inhabit virtually all habitat types in the unit. The southern and lower elevation areas provide mule deer hunting along the A-Cross road (Forest Road 60) and the Cherry Creek road (Forest Road 203). The northern and higher elevation areas north of Young to scout are the Naegelin Rim/Canyon area and the Valentine Ridge/Canyon area.

Access: Access is widely available via State Routes 260 and 288 and the complex of Forest Service roads. Some Forest service road closures in the northern part of the Unit exist during December through March to protect roads from damage during snow and rain. Check with the Tonto National Forest during these times. Be aware that if accessing Unit



23 by crossing Tonto Creek in Tonto Basin, that Tonto Creek is subject to temporary flooding and isolating travelers. The same warning holds true for crossing Cherry, Coon, and Salome Creeks. Smaller side drainages can also block travel for extended periods. The early archery hunt will generally have hot, summer-like temperatures with moderate to cool nights. Late archery hunters can see rain, snow, or clear/cold weather.

Tips: As with most big game hunting, peak mule deer activity periods are early morning and late evening. Be in your hunting area during these times. Hunters who get out and work the areas on foot are usually more successful than those hunters who stay close to roads. Utilize your binoculars and cover hillsides carefully before moving on.

Big Horn Sheep

Overview: Bighorn sheep have been documented in Unit 23 since the early 2000's with the first hunt being offered in 2005. Unit 23 and 24A are a combined sheep hunt unit.

Areas: A couple of areas to scout would include Spring Creek, Tonto Creek, Black Mesa, Parker Bluffs, and Salome Canyon in 23. Areas in 24A include Pinal Creek Canyon, Klondyke, Ash Creek, Dripping Springs Mountains, and the Mescal Mountains.

Overall, these sheep prefer steep rugged terrain where they can get to a high vantage point and overlook the landscape.

Tips: Pre-scouting is highly recommended in the areas suggested. The use of binoculars is your best option. Couple that with a tripod and a spotting scope and spend some time looking through them.

White-tailed Deer

Overview: White-tail deer numbers in unit 23 are stable.

White-tail deer in Unit 23 are managed for older age class bucks resulting in higher buck to doe ratios as well as higher fawn to doe ratios. When drawn, our department encourages hunters to participate in donating an incisor tooth sample



to help our department manage for older age class bucks.

White-tailed deer can be found in all habitats from the semi-desert grassland areas up through mixed-conifer forests. They are primarily found in a band of elevation from 3,500 feet to 6,000 feet. White-tailed deer prefer areas that do not experience heavy livestock densities. Required equipment for a successful hunt is a pair of binoculars and a tripod to mount them on and/or a spotting scope.

Areas: Popular areas holding high densities of white-tailed deer are between Cherry Creek and Tonto Creek at an elevation between 3,500 to 6,000 feet. All major drainages that run off of the Sierra Ancha Mountains hold white-tailed deer. For an undisturbed hunt, packing into one of the wilderness areas is a good plan. These are Salome, Hells Gate and Sierra Ancha. The north half of the unit also produces good hunt opportunities for white-tailed deer.

Tips: Pre-season scouting is very important. Locate an area away from roads and glass the area to locate deer. Use a Tonto National Forest map to help you locate areas in which to search. White-tailed deer are very localized and can be found in the same canyon or hillside several times. The December hunt is a great opportunity to harvest an older age class buck due to their active efforts to seek out a does.

Band-tailed Pigeon

Overview: Band-tailed pigeon numbers appear to be below average in Unit 23. These birds are fair weather residents and will migrate south with the onset of cooler weather. During some years, the mid-October season occurs after the bulk of the birds have headed south. Statewide, the band-tailed population appears to be on a downward trend. The reasons for this probably have more to do with timber harvest practices than any other factor. Band-tailed pigeons nest in dense stands of ponderosa pines, which in the past 20 years have been heavily thinned out in many areas. Gamble acorns are the primary fall food source in unit 23.

Areas: Areas to locate during Band-tailed pigeon season are areas of abundant oak mast. Look for Gambel oak thickets in the higher elevations and Emory and/or Arizona White oak thickets in the lower areas. The Mogollon Rim, Naegelin Rim/Canyon, Colcord Canyon, Canyon Creek, Gentry Mountain, Malicious Gap, Armer Mountain, Aztec Peak, and Cherry Creek all have good oak thickets.



Tips: Scouting up to a month prior to the season is advisable to locate areas of band-tailed pigeon concentrations. Acorns should be nearing ripening allowing them to be readily visible with the aid of binoculars. Locate water sources near these feeding areas as pigeons travel back and forth and a location between them will allow pass shooting.

Dove

Overview: Unit 23 is not considered a primary dove unit, but it does offer limited dove hunting opportunities. The summer “monsoons” thunderstorms usually push the few white-wing doves summering in Unit 23 south before the dove season opens. Mourning doves are the primary species available on the early hunt and the only species present during the late hunt.

Unit 23 has two dove hunts offered each year. The early season begins September 1 while the late season begins in November. Check the migratory bird hunt regulations for exact season dates.

Access: As with the other desert associated species, doves are primarily hunted in the southern and lower elevation areas of the unit. Tonto Creek and areas adjacent to the Salt River provide limited dove hunting. The low water crossings of Tonto Creek in the Punkin Center area are popular with local hunters. Some dove hunting is available in the sunflower thickets on Thompson Mesa, but road access is very poor. Earthen stock tanks scattered throughout the desert areas can also provide limited hunting. And as a reminder, heavy monsoon-type storms this summer have increased runoff. So be sure of crossing conditions before attempting to cross Tonto Creek at the low water crossings.

Tips: Due to limited dove numbers, most of the hunting is done at first light along the perennial streams such as Tonto, Coon, and Cherry Creeks. These early morning flights are usually over by 9 a.m. so the hunting time is limited. Check the migratory bird hunt regulations when available for possible changes in shooting hours in Unit 23.

Tree Squirrel

Overview: Unit 23 has three species of tree squirrels that have huntable populations. These are the Abert's (tassel-eared), Arizona gray, and the red or chickaree. Abert's are the most common of these three in unit 23. They inhabit Ponderosa Pine forest and are very rarely out of sight of a ponderosa pine tree. Next in abundance is the Arizona gray squirrel that inhabits the denser mixed broadleaf communities of riparian deciduous forest between the elevations of 5,000 and 6,500 feet (Brown 1984). The third species, the red, is found in the limited mixed conifer forest along the



Mogollon Rim.

Areas: Look for Abert's squirrels wherever you see ponderosa pine trees in unit 23. Favorable areas to hunt are the Naegelin rim/Canyon, Colcord Mountain, Aztec Peak, and the Canyon Creek areas. Arizona gray squirrels can be found along drainages of these same areas and in the Malicious Gap vicinity of the Sierra Ancha Mountains. Red squirrels are limited to the moist north facing slopes of Colcord Mountain and upper Canyon Creek.

Tips: From first light to mid-morning is the best time to look for squirrels. Squirrels tend to be out and active during calm clear days. Hunting squirrels in adverse weather is probably a waste of the hunter's time. Hunt by walking through good habitat and looking for squirrel sign. This includes pinecones that have been chewed on to squirrel sticks (short small diameter sticks that have had the bark chewed off). Also, small holes dug into the ground at the base of a ponderosa pine indicate that squirrels have been feeding on fungi. Where sign is found, the squirrel is nearby. Sit and wait to hear the sounds of squirrels feeding or scurrying about. Use binoculars to locate them in trees around you.

Quail

General Comments: The overall outlook for quail in Unit 23 is average. Quail numbers are affected by annual precipitation and quail numbers will increase when there is an increase in rainfall.

Hunt Structure: The quail hunt will be similar to the past years with a liberal 4-month season. The bag limit will again be 15 quail per day with a possession limit of 45 quail after the opening day. Unit 23's quail population is predominately Gambel's quail.

Access: Gambel's quail are primarily a desert scrub and chaparral species. This places the quail hunt emphasis on the southern and lower elevation areas of the unit. The southern portion of the unit around the base of the Sierra Anchas over to Cherry Creek and the Fort Apache Indian Reservation boundary comprises the bulk of the quail habitat in Unit 23. Access via the low water crossings of Tonto Creek in the Punkin Center vicinity and State Highway 288 to the A-Cross Road (Forest Road 60) and Cherry Creek Road (Forest Road 203) are the main access routes into the unit. Be cognizant of flow levels in Tonto Creek and check crossing conditions and weather before proceeding across the creek. Sudden monsoon-type storms could make Tonto Creek impassable for hours or days.



Tips: Check out the earthen stock tanks scattered throughout the desert areas, they provide water for a variety of species including quail. Quail often roost in cholla thickets or forests at night so check these areas out early in the morning and late evenings. Be cognizant of private property and home sites. Remember it is unlawful to discharge a firearm while hunting within 1/4 mile of any occupied building without permission.

Waterfowl

Usually called Roosevelt Lake, sometimes Lake Roosevelt, is a large reservoir formed by Theodore Roosevelt Dam on the Salt River in Arizona as part of the Salt River Project (SRP). Located roughly 80 miles northeast of Phoenix in the Salt River Valley, Roosevelt Lake is the largest lake or reservoir located entirely within the state of Arizona (Lake Mead and Lake Powell are larger but both are located partially within the neighboring states of Nevada and Utah respectively). Both the reservoir and the masonry dam that created it, Roosevelt Dam, were named for U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt who dedicated the dam himself in March 1911.

Roosevelt Lake is a popular spot for waterfowl hunters. Many species of both diving and puddle ducks call this lake home during the winter. Some of the more common waterfowl at Roosevelt include Northern Shoveler, Mallard, American Widgeon, Gadwall and Teal. The lake is also home to wintering flocks of Canada Geese with occasional Snow, Cackling and Ross visiting as well. The ducks and geese typically begin showing up as soon as the weather starts cooling quite a bit, especially in States to our North.

Pre-scouting areas prior to any hunting trip is always a good recommendation and waterfowl hunting is no exception. Finding areas where the birds are congregating is what you're looking for but can vary year to year. The water in Roosevelt Lake can fluctuate greatly with some of your favorite coves you hunted last year no longer existing this year. But with a little homework places with good hunting can always be found.

Most hunters focus their efforts on both the Tonto and Salt arms of the lake but coves in the main body of the lake offer good hunting also. Boats are required to hunt some of the areas on the lake but walk in shore hunters can do well also. Using decoys and calling seem to produce the best results although pass shooting can also be effective on either of the arms of the lake for those who do not have decoys. Portions of the lake are included in the Roosevelt Lake Wildlife Area and have seasonal hunting and access restrictions that occur during waterfowl season. The Roosevelt Lake Wildlife Area was created to give wildlife a place to be undisturbed during this time of the year.



See the information below for maps and area restrictions.

[Roosevelt Lake closure map](#)

[Waterfowl Boundary Modification](#)

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Unit Summary

Primary Game Species/ Hunting Month(s)

Black Bear	April-July, August-December
Mule Deer/ Whitetail Deer	October-November-December
Elk	September-December
Javelina	January-February

Climate Information

MONTH	AVG. TEMP	AVG. RAINFALL
January	Max 65°/Min 36°	0.84"
February	Max 69°/Min 37°	0.60"
March	Max 74°/Min 43°	0.77"
August	Max 102°/Min 73°	1.20"
September	Max 99°/Min 66°	0.76"
October	Max 88°/Min 54°	0.53"
November	Max 75°/Min 43°	0.50"
December	Max 67°/Min 37°	0.90"

Other Pertinent Climate Information

Temperatures and precipitation levels vary considerably due to the wide range in elevations. The weather may be warm and sunny in the lower elevations at the same time cold and wet in the higher elevations. During the winter months, snowfalls can accumulate at higher elevations. Check with the Forest Service Ranger District for weather and road conditions when planning your trip.



Cities, Roads & Campgrounds

Major Cities and Towns in or Near Game Management Unit and Nearest Gas, Food, and Lodging

Punkin Center, Young, Payson, Roosevelt

Major Highways and Roads Leading To

From the East: State Hwy 260

From the West: State Hwy 260

From the North: State Hwy 512

From the South: State Hwy 288

Developed Campgrounds

GMU 23 North – Christopher Creek Campground, Sharp Creek Campground, Colcord Campground, Airplane Flats, Upper Canyon Creek Campground, and Valentine Campground

GMU 23 South – Sawmill Flats

Undeveloped Campgrounds

Rose Creek and Reynolds Creek, all off Hwy 288.

Brief Description of Terrain, Elevation, and Vegetation

Elevations range from approximately 2,200' at Roosevelt Lake to 7,700' on Aztec Peak in the Sierra Anchas. Terrain is characterized by flat desert plains cut by washes at lower elevations and steep, rocky mountains and deep canyons at the higher. Vegetation varies from Sonoran desertscrub on the flats to coniferous forests on the mountains.

Government Agencies and Phone Numbers

Arizona Game and Fish Department, Region VI – 480 981-9400

Tonto National Forest, Tonto Basin Ranger District – 602-225-5395

Payson Ranger District – 928-474-7900