



GMU 28

Feb. 1, 2024

Species within this unit:

Bighorn Sheep, Black Bear, Javelina, Mule Deer, White-tailed Deer, Elk, Sandhill Crane, Cottontail Rabbit, Dove, Quail

Unit Boundaries

Beginning at I-10 and the New Mexico state line; north along the state line to AZ Hwy 78; southwest on AZ Hwy 78 to U.S. Hwy 191; northwest on U.S. Hwy 191 to Clifton; westerly on the Clifton-Morenci-San Carlos road to Eagle Creek; northerly along Eagle Creek to the San Carlos Indian Reservation boundary; southerly and west along the reservation boundary to U.S. Hwy 70; southeast on U.S. Hwy 70 to U.S. Hwy 191; south on U.S. Hwy 191 to I-10 Exit 352; easterly on I-10 to the New Mexico state line.

Species Information

Desert Bighorn Sheep

Overview: Desert Bighorn Sheep in Unit 28 were last surveyed in 2022 and the population continues to grow, producing exceptional rams year after year. The sheep herds mainly inhabit the Peloncillo Mountains, which are comprised of federal public lands and privately owned ranches that surround the Peloncillo Mountain Wilderness. Area: Desert Bighorn Sheep are located south of U.S. Highway 70 and north of I-10, between the towns of Duncan and San Simon. Access to the steep cliffs and rugged mountains these sheep call home can be challenging and often requires permission from landowners in the area. Roads from San Simon, Bowie, or Stein's Pass, NM all offer access and



vantage points into sheep habitat. Some key areas to look are Orange Butte, Midway Canyon, Tule Well, McKenzie Peak, and Engine Mountain. While this hunt area offers some of the best sheep hunting the state of Arizona has to offer, wildlife population densities differ widely from location to location so it is imperative to conduct ample pre-season scouting, ensuring you have the highest chances of successful hunt.

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

Overview: Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep are located north of U.S. Highway 70. Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep were last surveyed in 2023 and the population remains healthy. The total population of Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep is greater than the Desert Bighorn Sheep in the unit.

Area: Most of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep are located between Bonita Creek, Eagle Creek, Gila Mountains and the Gila River. As is the case with most sheep country the terrain is very rough, rugged, and steep. Access is limited to only a few roads.

The majority of the sheep are in the Eagle Creek drainage. Eagle Creek is best accessed by the Lower Eagle Creek Pump Station Road. The Freeport McMoran copper mine in Morenci has a large area of private holdings in this area which includes Eagle Creek. Eagle Creek is open to the public but for other Freeport private holdings it is highly recommended that you contact someone in security at the Morenci office to discuss access into the areas. Freeport will not allow access into active mining sites.

The country around Bonita Creek can be accessed from the Safford area by using the Solomon pass road or by using the Bonita Creek/Sanchez Road. The Gila Box has very limited access and will require some hiking from either of the other two areas listed earlier. It is also possible to access the Gila Box by floating the Gila River depending on water levels.

It is recommended that a good deal of time be spent in the preseason scouting the area to find the best sheep available. Some of the canyons or spots on the maps to scout are Gold Gulch, Bat Canyon, Turtle Mountain, Midnight Canyon, Horseshoe Canyon, Copperplate Canyon, and Hot Springs Canyon.

For those lucky enough to draw a tag and willing to do some preseason preparation this has been a very successful hunt. Weather at this time of year can be very unpredictable so you need to be ready for almost anything.



Black Bear

Overview: Black bear numbers are relatively low in Unit 28, and therefore there is only one hunt season held for Black Bear in the fall each year. Unit 28 has a one female bear harvest limit; this means that the hunt will close the Wednesday following the first female bear harvest. It is the hunter's responsibility to call the Department in order to determine which units are open to bear hunting (1-800-970-BEAR).

Areas: Black bears can be found in two general areas in Unit 28. The first is the densely forested northeast portion of the Unit, south of Hwy 78. The second is throughout the Gila Mountains that run northwest from Safford, along the San Carlos Indian Reservation boundary.

The area in the northeast portion of Unit 28 is contiguous with the bear habitat found in Unit 27. The habitat is thick, brushy, rough, and not easy to hunt. The habitat in the Gila Mountains tends to be more open but just as steep and rough, with more cactus. Spot and stalk techniques have been successful in these areas in the past, but habitual travel corridors can also be identified with enough effort.

In September, bears can usually be found feeding on prickly pear fruit. Areas with large patches of prickly pear near juniper thickets are good spots to start looking. These areas include Johnny Creek, Markham Creek, Brushy Canyon, Day Mine Canyon, and the Fishhooks Wilderness.

Javelina

Overview: Javelina can be found throughout Unit 28 in varying degrees, and tend to rely heavily on the numerous Game and Fish water catchments across the unit. Javelina were last surveyed in 2023 and the population remains healthy, with herd sizes usually ranging from 5 to 10 individuals.

Unit 28 is quite large with many different habitat types throughout different elevation levels. Wildlife population densities differ widely from location to location so it is imperative to conduct ample pre-season scouting, ensuring you have the highest chances of a successful hunt.

Areas: Javelina herds can be found anywhere in Unit 28, from the creosote flats to the prickly pear covered hillsides or the higher elevation juniper-pinon woodlands. The Whitlock Mountains, Gila Mountains, and Black Hills are all great places to set up and glass for herds as they meander and feed.



Javelina can also be found on the perimeter of the numerous agricultural fields that line either side of the Gila River. These fields are mostly privately owned and land owners should be contacted for permission before attempting to hunt these areas.

Mule Deer

Overview: Mule deer are wide spread across Unit 28 and tend to rely heavily on the numerous Game and Fish water catchment throughout the unit. Mule Deer were last surveyed in 2023 and the population remains healthy.

Unit 28 is quite large with many different habitat types throughout different elevation levels. Wildlife population densities differ widely from location to location so it is imperative to conduct ample pre-season scouting, ensuring you have the highest chances of successful hunt.

Areas: The numerous canyons and mountain ranges in Unit 28 hold relatively low numbers of deer but regularly produce exceptional bucks, making for a challenging but rewarding hunt.

The Gila Mountains, with key areas like Day Mine Canyon, Oliver Knoll, Solomon Pass, and Turtle Mountain retain mule deer year-round. The Whitlock Mountains east of Safford and south of U.S. Hwy 70 are accessible from Haekel Road on the west side and Hackberry Ranch Road on the east, with many two-track roads and water catchments to explore.

The area around Guthrie Peak, between U.S. Hwy 191 and the Gila River offers many canyons to hunt mule deer, and can be accessed via a BLM road called the Black Hills Backcountry Byway.

White-tailed Deer

Overview: Unit 28 offers limited whitetail deer hunting. Approximately 10-12 whitetails are taken in Unit 28 each year.

Areas: The majority of whitetails are harvested in the northeastern part of Unit 28, south of Hwy 78. The habitat is very thick with brush and can be difficult to hunt. A few deer are also taken on Turtle Mountain. This area is northeast of Safford and lies between Bonita Creek and lower Eagle Creek north of the Gila River. Four-wheel drive is recommended for this area and depending on the conditions, can be a must. The Fishhook Wilderness Area in the northwest portion of Unit 28, along the San Carlos Reservation, can also hold pockets of whitetail. To be successful on a whitetail hunt it is highly recommended that detailed maps be obtained and that time is spent in the preseason scouting. This will help you become familiar with the area and possibly locate where the deer (bucks) are running.



Elk

Overview: Unit 28 offers limited elk hunting. All elk hunts in unit 28 are limited opportunity or over the counter, non-permit tag hunts. Unit 28 is not traditional elk country but there are a few areas where elk will move into the unit from the San Carlos Reservation, unit 27, or New Mexico.

Areas: Elk are not found throughout unit 28. They are found along the boundary with the San Carlos Reservation and in the northeast corner of the unit. Elk can be found anywhere along the San Carlos Boundary in the Gila Mountains but some areas to begin looking are Diamond Bar Ranch, the Fishhooks Wilderness, Day Mine Road, Markham Creek, Pima Gap, and Johnny Creek. All areas are rough to very rough with limited road access. The northeast corner of the unit has very thick vegetation and can be tough to move through. Elk will occasionally be found along the Gila River near Ft. Thomas. An important note is the Gila River Corridor is closed for the over the counter, non-permit hunt. As with any limited opportunity hunt these hunts can be very tough and there is a chance the hunter will not find any elk.

Sandhill Crane

Overview: Sandhill Cranes are found mainly along the Gila River in agricultural areas in unit 28. With proper pre-season scouting hunters can be successful. Pre-season scouting is very important because Sandhill Crane numbers fluctuate and they will use different areas from year to year.

Areas: Due to the large number of farm fields it can be difficult to predict where the birds will go to feed. One way to locate areas is to follow birds as they leave the roost to fields where they are currently feeding. Once their feeding locations are determined, get permission from the landowner to hunt the field then set up in that field before dawn the following morning. A good landownership map can also be useful in locating state land or BLM land sections on the edges of farm fields. Local Wildlife Managers do not keep a list of the landowners that provide access as these can change from year to year and it is the hunter's responsibility to obtain landowner permission prior to hunting on private property. Some Cranes will also roost on stock tanks after feeding and before returning to their night-roost sites so some hunters have found success in "puddle jumping" the tanks or setting on those tanks waiting for them to come in. This style may also provide hunters the opportunity to take other waterfowl.

Cottontail Rabbit

Overview: Unit 28 is very large with approximately 2400 square miles of surface area and cottontails are found



throughout the unit. The majority of the cottontails harvested in this unit are in conjunction with other hunting activities such as dove and quail hunting. With the dry conditions of recent years the most productive hunting areas will likely be located near water sources. The overall rabbit numbers in Unit 28 appear to be down slightly from past years due primarily to the current drought conditions that exist. The rabbit population can respond quickly to changes in weather conditions.

Area: The Gila River in Unit 28 runs from the New Mexico state line to the San Carlos Indian Reservation. Much of the area along the river is privately owned; therefore it is a good idea to obtain permission before attempting to hunt an area.

The San Simon Valley has many dirt stock tanks which can offer good cottontail hunting and is located southeast of Safford. The San Simon Valley is best accessed by taking Tanque Road east from Hwy 191 south of Safford and by taking Haeckel Road south from Hwy 70 east of Safford. A map of the area will be very helpful when hunting.

Dove

Overview: Mourning Dove makes up the majority of the dove harvest in unit 28. Good hunting opportunities can be found near livestock water, harvested grain fields, and along the Gila River.

While pre-season scouting, one may find cut grain fields along the Gila River. These attract large numbers of dove and can provide fast and furious shooting. Scouting may also locate a “water hole” used by dove. Keep in mind that the birds may water after they feed and their trip to water may take place later in the morning.

With dry conditions the birds are usually found close to a water source. Although even in dry years there seems to be fair numbers of birds across the desert. One of the key factors with dove hunting success has to do with summer rains and how long the birds stay around before they start to migrate south. Some years their timing seems to coincide with the start of the early hunt. A little preseason scouting can payoff big on opening morning.

Areas: The Gila River runs from New Mexico to the San Carlos Indian Reservation. Grain fields may be found around Duncan, Safford, and throughout the Gila Valley. Checking these fields just before the season will locate the fields currently being used by dove. Be sure to obtain permission from the landowner before shooting. The San Simon Valley has many dirt stock tanks and is southeast of Safford. The valley is best accessed by taking Tanque Road east from highway 191 or by taking Haeckel Road south from highway 70.



Quail

Overview: The amount of winter moisture received each year has a direct correlation on the number of quail seen. Years of high winter rainfall produce large numbers of young birds where low winter rains produce few birds. Unit 28 has received below average winter rains for the past several winters. The birds seem to be frequently located near a water source.

Both Gambel's and Scaled quail can be found in Unit 28. Gambel's quail can be found anywhere in the unit, while Scaled Quail are only found in the foothills of the Peloncillo Mountains. The Scaled Quail in the unit seem to be able to utilize the summer rains and their numbers can be affected by the amount of summer precipitation received.

Areas: Gambel's quail can be found along the Gila River. Some of the areas along the river are very thick with brush. Quail may be found coming and going to the river with roosting sites found in the mesquite thickets. Some patience is required to hunt quail in these areas, even though quail numbers are quite high along the river.

Gambel's quail can also be found in the foothills of the Gila Mountains north and northwest of Safford, the Whitlock Mountains southeast of Safford, the Black Hills east of Safford and the Peloncillo Mountains south and west of Duncan. The Gila Mountains can be accessed by crossing the Gila River in Solomon, Safford, Thatcher, Pima, Eden, or Fort Thomas. A road parallels the river on the north side and runs from the mouth of Bonita Creek to Geronimo. There are many side roads that will allow access to the Gila Mountains and quail can be located in most areas.

The Whitlock Mountains may be found by traveling east from Safford on Hwy 70. At milepost 362.1 on Hwy 70 between Safford and Duncan, you will find the Hackberry Ranch Road. This road travels south and allows access to the Whitlock Mountains.

The desert east of Hwy 191 offers good Gambel's hunting. Tanque Road, south of Safford, offers access to the sloping hills which run into the San Simon Valley. Many other small roads can be found heading east off Hwy 191.

Scaled quail can be found in the foothills and on the grassy slopes surrounding the Peloncillo Mountains. These mountains are located west and south of Duncan. They can also be accessed from the Hackberry Ranch Road. The Lazy-B Ranch, south of Duncan, offers limited scaled quail hunting. Access to this ranch can be found off highway 70 between Duncan and Lordsburg, about 5 miles into New Mexico.

In general, quail can be found throughout unit 28. A scouting trip prior to your hunt can prove to be very beneficial.





Unit Summary

Primary Game Species/ Hunting Month(s)

Mule Deer	October/November
Javelina	January/February
Bighorn Sheep	December

Secondary Game Species/Hunting Month(s)

Quail	October-February
Dove	September

Climate Information

MONTH	AVG. TEMP	AVG. RAINFALL
January	Max 61°/Min 30°	0.69"
February	Max 66°/Min 33°	0.41"
September	Max 93°/Min 61°	1.12"
October	Max 83°/Min 49°	0.61"
November	Max 70°/Min 36°	0.35"
December	Max 61°/Min 48°	0.79"

Other Pertinent Climate Information

Snow, sleet, and hail, 1.3" per year based on a 30-year average.



Cities, Roads & Campgrounds

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

Safford-Thatcher, Clifton-Morenci, San Simon-Bowie, Duncan

Major Highways and Roads Leading To

From the East: I-10, U.S. 70

From the West: I-10, U.S. 70

From the North: State Hwy 191, U.S. 78

From the South: State Hwy 191

Developed Campgrounds

Roper Lake State Park on U.S. 191 south of Safford has water, flush toilets, a sewage disposal station, and 90 campsites; 32 of them have water and electrical hookups. Blackjack Campground (Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest) near the state line on U.S. 78 has picnic tables, barbecue pits, vault toilets, but no water.

Undeveloped Campgrounds

Camping is allowed on BLM and Forest Service administered public lands.

Brief Description of Terrain, Elevation, and Vegetation

The unit's terrain is very rocky with rugged mountains. Elevation ranges from 3,000' to 7,000'; vegetation ranges from riparian cottonwood-willow and salt cedar along the Gila River, to Chihuahuan Desert in the lower elevations and oak woodland and/or pinyon-juniper at the higher elevations (Gila Mountains and Mule Creek Pass).

Government Agencies and Phone Numbers

Arizona Game and Fish Department, Region V – 520-628-5376

Bureau of Land Management, Safford District Office – 928-348-4400

Apache-Sitgreaves Natl Forest, Clifton District – 928-687-8600

Roper Lake/Dankworth Ponds State Park – 928-428-6760