

# FALL HUNTING SEASONS PREVIEW FOR 2017

**Looking back,  
gauging forward  
progress**

By Kevin Kelly



IT IS OFTEN said these are the good old days for hunting in Kentucky, but the road to get here was not traveled overnight.

It took foresight and cooperation, determination and hard work over several decades to lay the groundwork for the breadth of opportunities now afforded to hunters.

The year 1997 produced several milestones that hunters benefit from today.

Twenty years ago, biologists released the state's first free-roaming elk in 150 years

into the mountains of eastern Kentucky. The herd has since grown into the largest east of the Rocky Mountains, and hunters are enjoying lofty success rates as a result.

That same year saw the conclusion of a decades-long push to restore wild turkeys across the state. This past spring, hunters enjoyed one of the best seasons on record.

In 1997, archery season for deer expanded into September and 53 counties received liberalized zone regulations to expand op-

portunities for hunters. Last season, hunters tallied the third highest harvest on record.

Former Kentucky Afield writer J.B. "Beth" Garland profiled each of the state's five wildlife regions in a series of magazine articles in 1997. In this issue, Kentucky Afield revisits those regions for its fall hunting preview for the Purchase, Green River, Bluegrass, Northeast and Southeast areas of Kentucky and the wide-range of hunting opportunities available in each.

## PURCHASE REGION



*"When we think of the Purchase Region, we think of wetlands, boating and big water fishing, but these are only part of the wildlife story. The Purchase is a hunting haven and a wildlife viewer's paradise."*

*—J.B. Garland, Kentucky Afield, January-February 1997*

THE SAME DESCRIPTION of western Kentucky's Purchase Region applies today. Renowned for its waterfowl opportunities at Ballard, Boatwright and Doug Travis wildlife management areas (WMAs), the region also offers excellent opportunities for deer, turkey and small game.

Hunters checked more than 21,000 deer in the Purchase Region in the 2016-17 season. Crittenden County produced the state's third highest harvest total and was joined in the top five by two other Purchase Region counties, Graves and Christian. The deer in those counties encounter above-average hunting pressure each year but the population shows time after time that it can withstand it.

"From some of the people that I've spoken with and from some of the pictures that I've seen, there are some quality deer out there on the



hoof," said Tony Black, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's regional coordinator of wildlife for the Purchase Region. "It's shaping up to be a pretty good season."

More deer were harvested on Clarks River National Wildlife Refuge in Graves, Marshall and McCracken counties and 107,594-acre Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area in Trigg and Lyon counties than any other public land in the Purchase Region last season. But don't overlook Jones-Keeney WMA in Caldwell County and Pennyryle State Forest in Christian and Caldwell counties, Black said.

The 15-inch minimum outside antler spread restriction for deer has been removed Pennyryle State Forest as well as Ballard WMA and West Kentucky WMA in McCracken County, which also will host a new youth-mentor, shotgun-only quota hunt in November.

"I don't know how much pressure it gets, but Jones-Keeney WMA is one I've always liked," Black said. "It has

some older timber on it. Over the years, I haven't seen a whole lot of people hunt up there. Most of



CHRISTI BLACK PHOTO

**Purchase Regional Coordinator Tony Black enjoys hunting with his daughter, Reagan.**

it's walk-in but I've always liked that area.

"A lot of people like to go to Pennyryle State Forest and it's always had some really good deer on it. If you're willing to work for it, it will pay off."

An up-and-coming destination is Livingston County WMA and State Nature Area. Working with the county, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife has been improving habitat and access.

"It's come a good ways," Black said.

The habitat work should lend itself to improved rabbit hunting. Black also likes its potential for deer hunters. "It's

unusual because the gun deer season is pretty much limited to muzzleloader, so it will be wide open for someone who wants to bow hunt," he said.

Three projects completed this year on Doug Travis WMA in Carlisle and Hickman counties have created or enhanced almost 80 acres of habitat for waterfowl and wading birds. The work expands and improves opportunities for waterfowl hunters on the 4,200-acre area.

West Kentucky WMA is the premier destination in the region for upland game. For hunters who want to try for swamp rabbits, Black suggests the bottoms on Obion Creek WMA. The 4,258-acre area includes a patchwork of properties dotting Hickman, Carlisle and Fulton counties.

# GREEN RIVER REGION



*"Bison herds dotted the landscape when Daniel Boone arrived. Today, the bison are gone, but there are strong populations of other animals. In 1995, Green River contained three of Kentucky's top five deer harvest counties and the top turkey harvest county. Additionally, many species of waterfowl can be seen as they migrate yearly through the wetlands around Henderson." – J.B. Garland, Kentucky Afield, March-April 1997*

**T**HE GREEN RIVER Region is the section of western Kentucky roughly from Hopkinsville east to Elizabethtown.

Hunters know this region for popular destinations such as Big Rivers WMA and State Forest in Crittenden and Union counties for deer and turkey hunting; Peabody WMA in Ohio, Hopkins and Muhlenberg counties for small game as well as deer and turkey; and Sloughs WMA in Henderson and Union counties for waterfowl.

Deer hunters in the 25-county region

## KNOW YOUR BOUNDARIES

As their limitations for practical field use grow less pronounced over time, smartphones are increasingly must-have tools for hunters.

Many smartphones come preloaded with a compass, mapping software and GPS capability. Apps like Explorer for ArcGIS can enhance the navigation experience. A search for "Kentucky Public Hunting" returns a map with public hunting areas outlined and shaded.

Hunters in the field can view their GPS location directly on boundary maps. Users can choose from various map backgrounds, including satellite imagery and topographic. Data usage rates may apply. The app is available for iOS and Android devices.



harvested more than 35,000 deer during the 2016-17 season – second only to the Bluegrass Region – with hunters in Breckinridge County leading the way.

The region is home to 6,760-acre Yellowbank WMA. In addition to archery and youth gun opportunities, the area will be open this year for the December muzzleloader season.

"This is the first firearms opportunity for deer on the area in a long time," said Scott Harp, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's regional coordinator of wildlife for the Green River Region. "The deer herd primarily uses agricultural fields in the river bottoms during the evening hours, so stands adjacent to bedding areas and on travel lanes to these sites should provide shot opportunities."

The fall archery seasons for deer and turkey on Peabody WMA's

45,000 acres are some of the region's most underutilized opportunities, Harp believes. The size and rough terrain of the area lends itself to larger bucks being able to successfully bed down during the day once traffic on the area picks up in November.

"Look for trails from bedding areas to neighboring agricultural fields, as well as funnels between adjoining waterbodies," Harp said.



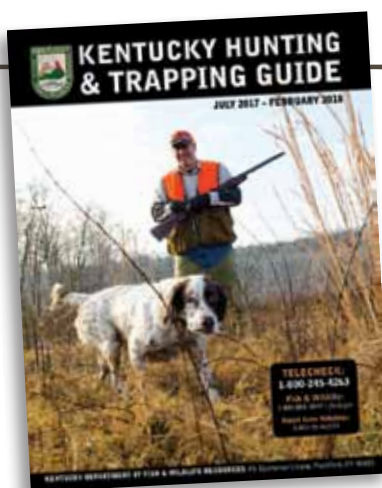
JEFF FOREMAN PHOTO

## Green River Regional Coordinator Scott Harp

The region regularly leads the state in spring turkey harvest. More than half of the wild turkeys harvested on public land in the Green River Region this spring were taken on Peabody WMA, which also is one of five quail focus areas in the state.

At Sloughs WMA in Henderson and Union counties, waterfowl hunters

should benefit from habitat work performed in the past two years on the Crenshaw tract and on the Grassy Pond-Powell's Lake Unit.



## More areas open

**O**PPORTUNITIES TO HUNT deer expanded on almost two dozen of Kentucky's wildlife management areas in time for the 2017-18 season.

The December muzzleloader season will be open on 17 more wildlife management areas (WMAs). Eight areas previously closed for the youth gun seasons in October and December will be open this season. A



# BLUEGRASS REGION



*"From spring white bass runs on Dix River to fall cottontail hunting in the Knobs, the Bluegrass holds great fish and wildlife diversity and potential. The region's greatest turkey population density is in the northern portion, and waterfowl hunting is an increasing opportunity throughout the area. In the recent past, the region has been host to the reintroduction of endangered peregrine falcons. Another species, the river otter, began its comeback when the first release was made in 1991."*  
—J.B. Garland, *Kentucky Afield*, November–December 1997



TIM WAKEFIELD PHOTO

## Bluegrass Regional Coordinator Derek Beard

Derek Beard, Bluegrass Region wildlife coordinator for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "In the last five years, it has added more than 10,000 acres in the region."

Habitat improvement projects in the region include converting tall fescue to native vegetation, removing invasive species, planting trees and shrubs, making forest stand improvements, creating and maintaining annual and perennial food plots, and wetland development.

New this year is the 398-acre Stephens Creek WMA in Gallatin County and a 1,000-acre addition to the John A. Kleber WMA complex in Owen County. Last fall, the department opened the 2,890-acre Rolling Fork WMA, as well as another 511-acre tract on Kleber

WMA.

"I expect Taylorsville Lake WMA, Rolling Fork WMA, Kentucky River WMA and Veterans Memorial WMA to lead the way again in deer archery harvest," Beard said.

The biggest and most exciting change will occur in December when more WMAs will be open to muzzleloader hunting for deer. All of the region's WMAs, except for Marion County WMA and State Forest, are in Zone 1 counties that offer hunters an unlimited take of does.

Some of the better small game hunting opportunities within the region include Kentucky River WMA in Henry and Owen counties, Griffith Woods WMA in Harrison County, Veterans Memorial WMA in Scott County, J.C. Williams WMA in Nelson County and Rolling Fork WMA in Nelson and LaRue counties.



**H**UNTING IN THE Bluegrass Region of central Kentucky runs the spectrum from small game to the highly coveted trophy bucks, with seasons structured to provide a variety of hunting experiences with an emphasis on opportunity.

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife has 17 wildlife management areas totaling more than 30,000 acres in the Bluegrass Region.

"With 54 percent of the state's population residing within the region, the department recognizes the need for additional wildlife-related recreational and land conservation within the Golden Triangle," said

## for late muzzleloader, youth gun deer seasons

list of the affected areas appears in the annual Kentucky Hunting and Trapping Guide. The guide is available online at [fw.ky.gov](http://fw.ky.gov), or wherever licenses and permits are sold.

"It's a management tool as our deer densities are too high on these areas, so we wanted to allow some more gun hunting opportunity and in turn try to reduce some of those populations," said Gabe Jenkins, deer

program coordinator with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

Also new for the 2017-18 hunting season are seven deer quota hunt choices on four state parks: Dale Hollow Lake State Resort Park, Greenbo Lake State Resort Park, Kenlake State Resort Park and Kincaid Lake State Park. In addition, there are new open deer hunts at Blue Licks Battle-

field State Resort Park, Carter Caves State Resort Park, John James Audubon State Park and My Old Kentucky Home State Park.

"The two agencies worked together to come up with a handful of additional areas that either will be quota hunts administered by us or hunts that state parks will offer directly," Jenkins said.



# NORTHEAST REGION



*"Outdoor opportunities abound in the Northeast as a result of KDFWR (Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources) efforts.... Besides being some of the best grouse country in the state, hunters in the region will find plentiful squirrels and opportunities for both eastern rabbits and Appalachian cottontails."*

*—J.B. Garland, Kentucky Afield, September–October 1997*



open ground the best we can for small game and early successional habitat," he said. "You'll see forest management and we hope from a grouse standpoint that in the next few years we'll start to see an increase in grouse numbers."

The Northeast Region routinely is represented on the annual trophy bucks list published in the Kentucky Hunting and Trapping Guide. Clay WMA in Nicholas, Bath and Fleming counties and Paintsville WMA in Johnson and Morgan counties carry big buck potential, Gregory said.

Paintsville WMA offers ample edge habitat and corridors.

"Forest management work has been going on there for several years now," Gregory said. "That's made a lot of deer habitat, a lot of deer browse and has really increased the capacity."

In addition to quality deer hunting, Clay WMA is a hotspot for small game.

Gregory adds that Yatesville Lake WMA in Lawrence County and Paintsville Lake WMA provide good rabbit hunting opportunity. He considers Grayson Lake WMA in Carter and Elliott counties as a sleeper pick for fall turkey.

There is good waterfowl hunting potential in the Northeast, but it can be weather dependent. South Shore WMA in Greenup County is worth a look.

"If the water is there, it's really good waterfowl hunting," Gregory said. "If it's colder up north and pushes the ducks down, we'll have a myriad of ducks there. Pressure has been light over the last several years because it has tended to be dry. Locals use it a lot. It's one of those things that you really need to watch the river gauge and kind of know the area. But if you figure it out and know there's a pretty good shot of water being in it, it's a good place to go."



DAVE BAKER PHOTO

## BE BEAR AWARE

The bear hunting section of the current Kentucky Hunting and Trapping Guide has been updated online at [fw.ky.gov](http://fw.ky.gov) to reflect a host of changes that took effect after the publication was printed. The two-page section also is available on its own through the department's website.

Changes include an expanded three zone bear hunting area instead of a smaller, one zone area. Season dates and quotas vary by zone. There is a new muzzleloader season and non-resident hunters can now buy bear permits. Hunters also will find season dates, quotas and a map of the bear zones in the updated section.

"Opportunity is going to be terrific this year," said Mike Strunk, Southeast Region wildlife biologist. "In the past, one of the limiting factors that a lot of hunters mentioned was the fact of the quota and how it could hurt some of those hunters outside of those areas with large numbers of bear."

"The zones and the quotas associated with those zones will allow hunters more opportunity. I think it's going to allow the seasons to stay open a little bit longer instead of closing down the first day because the quota has been met."



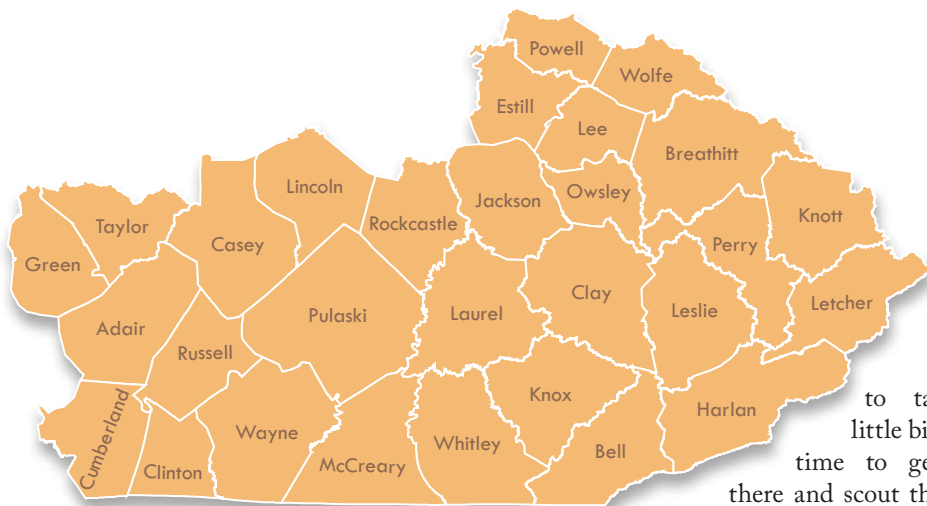
AMBER GREGORY PHOTO

**Northeast Regional Coordinator  
Nathan Gregory**

# SOUTHEAST REGION



*"The biological diversity of the Southeast is unique. Bobcats, grouse and raccoons become the aim of hunters and their mountain cur dogs. Black bears and wild hogs live here. Appalachian cottontails roam the high ground. Nine neotropical bird species build nests only on the higher reaches of Black Mountain and nowhere else in Kentucky." – J.B. Garland, Kentucky Afield, May-June 1997*



of that nature that may attract some deer into them this year, especially with the mast crop being what it is," Strunk said.

Like the Northeast Region, the Southeast Region was impacted by this summer's epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) outbreak. Even so, Strunk sees reason for optimism.

"I think it's going to be a good year for hunters in the Southeast," he said. "The acorn crop is pretty spotty down here this year. What we've noticed is if you find a white oak that has acorns, it's loaded, but you really have to get out and search for those trees. If a hunter does that then you could be sitting in a great spot."

For the same reasons, he believes it will be a good year for bear hunters with expanded opportunity through a newly implemented zone structure.

"In those good mast years, a bear could pretty much be anywhere," Strunk said. "Now that we are experiencing somewhat of a spotty year, food sources are fairly limited, so hunter's odds should go up as far as being able to encounter a bear."

Twenty years after restocking efforts started, Kentucky elk are behaving as wild elk do. They're spending less time in the open and more time in the timber.

"We're to the point where the elk have figured out how to utilize the forest a little bit more and utilize it to elude hunters," Strunk said. "They're not as visible as they once were, but they're there. It's just going

to take a little bit more time to get out there and scout the area out and figure out where they're at instead of just glassing fields and hoping."

Pulaski County led the state in fall turkey harvest last year and summer poult surveys from the southeast have been encouraging, Strunk said.

"There should be plenty of birds out there for people to take advantage of this fall into next spring and, again, we've got plenty of acres," he said.

Some of the better small game hunting opportunities within the region include 42,298-acre Lake Cumberland WMA in Clinton, McCreary, Pulaski, Russell and Wayne counties, 2,293-acre Paul Van Booven WMA in Breathitt County and other hunter access areas in the region's mountainous eastern half. Strunk believes in time the newly opened 2,924-acre Rockcastle River WMA in Pulaski County could become the region's premier small game area.

Efforts to improve habitat and promote a rebound of the grouse population are ramping up across the Southeast and Northeast regions. That's something the department is focused on and will be working toward over the next several years. ■

A SPOTTY ACORN crop portends good opportunity for hunters in the Southeast Region. There is plenty of room to spread out as the region boasts an abundance of public land, led by the venerable Daniel Boone National Forest, which reaches into 17 of the region's counties.

"It's hard to look past the Daniel Boone National Forest just because of the size. It's really nice to have an over 600,000-acre playground in your backyard," said Mike Strunk, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife's Southeast Wildlife Region coordinator. "It provides a lot of opportunity for hunters up and down the region and there are some really good places within it."

"I would definitely start by looking at some of our WMAs that fall within its bounds. They receive a little bit higher level of management, especially some of the wildlife openings."

Cane Creek WMA is one of those. Located about 15 miles west of London, it is more than 90 percent forested but openings are strategically scattered throughout its more than 6,500 acres.

"On some of the openings on Cane Creek WMA, we've actually got some annual grains and legumes and other plantings



DALE STRUNK PHOTO

**Southeast Regional Coordinator Mike Strunk with daughter Ally.**

## NEWLY OPENED or EXPANDED WMAs

- **Rockcastle River WMA – 2,924 acres in Pulaski County**
- **Stephens Creek WMA – 398 acres in Gallatin County**
- **Meadow Creek WMA – 232 acres in Wayne County**
- **John A. Kleber WMA, House tract – 1,019 acres in Owen County**
- **Clay WMA, Kingsolver tract – 945 acres in Nicholas County**