



Know Before You Go

UNDERSTANDING NON-RESIDENT TAGS

Over-the-counter licenses, limited-draw tags, landowner tags, conservation tags, governors tags, there are many of ways to secure your right to hunt depending on where and what you want to pursue. Each state has its own set of rules and it can be a complex process to understand. Here's a quick breakdown of most of the more common options out there. You'll need to understand them before booking your next hunting trip and shopping around for outfitters.

Over-the-Counter Licenses

These are the most common licenses in most states outside of the West and simply means tags can be bought any time by going online or visiting a sporting goods shop that retails hunting licenses for the state. Areas with over-the-counter licenses will also translate into more hunting pressure and fewer quality animals when talking Western big game hunts such as elk, mule deer and other species. That said, if your focus is not a trophy but simply a fun opportunity to put meat in the freezer, an over the counter tag may be the best option for you.

Limited-Draw Tags

This is the system which is most associated with big game trophy hunting and probably also creates the most confusion for hunters. Deadlines to apply begin as early as January and run through June of the year for which the tag is sought, meaning a hunter has to plan well in advance of his trip. Quite honestly, the rules surrounding applying and determining the proper hunt unit can be about as confusing as doing your taxes.

However, drawings also limit the number of hunters and hunting pressure in an area by restricting how many people can hunt a zone and, ultimately, how many animals will be taken in that area. It improves the overall hunting experience and chances for a trophy animal for those fortunate enough to draw a tag.

Both helping and confusing the issue of drawing a tag are three types of systems states employ. They are the Random Drawing System, the Bonus Point System and the Preference Point System.

Random Drawing

With no points system in place, states that conduct random drawings simply pull hunters' names from a pool of applicants until they have issued all of the tags. Some states will limit the number of tags to be awarded to nonresidents meaning once the number of nonresident tags are filled, the remaining tags will go to resident hunters.

Bonus Point System

With the bonus point system, a sportsman receives a bonus point every time he enters a draw, but doesn't receive a tag. For each bonus point, the hunter's name is thrown into the random drawing. It's like buying 10 raffle tickets in a raffle instead of having only one chance with one ticket. Each year, your odds increase of drawing the tag you seek.

Preference Point System

This system simply allows hunters with the most preference points to draw all the available tags. If a hunter doesn't draw another preference point is earned. Many states allow hunters to purchase a preference point and not enter the drawing at all. In some zones or units or for some species, a hunter will need to enter a drawing for a certain number of years knowing they won't draw a tag until they've earned the allotted number of preference points. For example, if a popular elk unit requires that a nonresident have five preference points before a tag can be awarded, that means the hunter wishing to hunt that unit will need to enter the drawing for five straight years to earn enough points that he might get the opportunity to eventually draw a tag. Some tags can take 10 to 20+ years to secure, but the hunting is usually excellent, and once you've earned your preference points, your tag is usually guaranteed.

Landowner Tags

In some states where hunting is restricted to drawing a tag, landowners are awarded a certain number of guaranteed tags usually dependent on the amount of land they own. In certain states, landowners can choose to sell them to outfitters and hunters. By purchasing a landowner tag a hunter can bypass the drawing process and guarantee their hunt for the year. Prices vary tremendously depending on state, unit, animal, season and method of take but generally range from \$500 to \$10,000.

Reservation Tags

Many Native American tribes are permitted to manage the natural resources on their reservations as they see fit, which means they too might have hunts available for purchase allowing a sportsman to bypass any state drawings. While some tribes have been criticized in the past for not managing resources with the same attention as the state agency, many have recognized the amount of dollars a quality hunting experience can net and as such have managed game to that end. Several reservations have built excellent reputations for producing trophy elk and mule deer. Hunts on reservations such as the White Mountain Apache's in Arizona and Jicarilla in New Mexico can be very expensive.

Governor's Tags

In some states conversation groups receive what's called Governor's Tags from the state that they can auction off to the highest bidder to raise money for habitat improvement projects and the like. These tags typically allow a hunter exceptional flexibility in terms of season dates and method of take. Such tags often bring in big money and go to sportsman with ample financial resources.

Now that you understand the various options available to you as you shop for your hunt, start researching the places you want to hunt and determine if their licensing options fit with your goals and finances.