Updated Sept. 29

Montana Deer & Elk License Trends, 2016–2025

This is a ***preview*** of the data that is being compiled by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks for a final report that will be published by Dec. 1, 2026.

- The total number of nonresident elk hunters grew from 19,914 in 2016 to 22,092 in 2025. The number of nonresident elk hunters hunting exclusively elk and not deer grew from 5,201 in 2016 to 7,940 in 2025 whereas the number of nonresident hunters hunting both deer and elk decreased from 14,713 to 14,152 between 2016 and 2025. Nonresident elk B license sales grew from 1,753 in 2016 to 4,337 in 2025. The availability of elk B licenses is determined by the number of licenses approved by the Commission and the 10% cap on nonresident licenses issued through the draw.
- Nonresident deer license sales (general deer and deer B) peaked in 2021 at 42,596 and dropped to 34,001 in 2025. Nearly every nonresident license category grew between 2019 and 2021 and have fallen off since, though still above 2016 license levels.

- Resident hunters are more frequently hunting both deer and elk rather than one or the other. The number of residents hunting only deer decreased from 36,476 in 2016 to 25,679 in 2025. The number of residents hunting only elk decreased from 9,571 to 6,475 between 2016 and 2025. Resident hunters hunting both deer and elk increased from 124,779 in 2016 to 134,456 in 2025.
- Changes in licensing structures of note: In 2020 the total number of elk licenses a hunter could hold increased to three (87-2-501, MCA). In 2024, a holder of a valid Class B-10 nonresident big game combination license or a valid Class B-11 nonresident deer combination license could purchase no more than two Class B-8 nonresident deer B tags while hunters without a combination license could purchase only one (87-2-104, MCA).

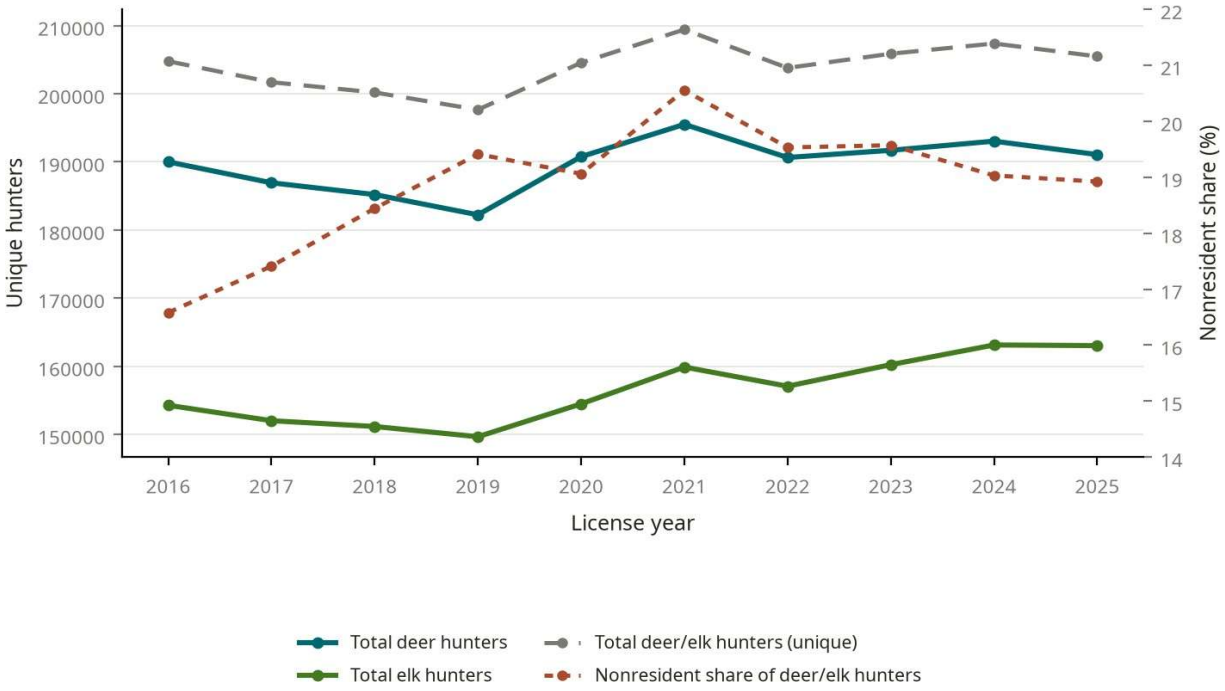
These analyses are preliminary and will be more thoroughly evaluated and presented in the study report as required through House Bill 568, the Montana Hunters First Act (signed into law May 2025). The report is due to the legislature by Dec. 1, 2026.

1. Deer and Elk Hunters, 2016–2025

Elk hunter numbers slightly increased along with elk populations while deer hunter numbers leveled out as deer populations declined

Total elk hunters increased from about 154,300 in 2016 to 163,000 in 2025. Total deer hunters remained stable ranging from around 190,000 in 2016 to around 191,000 in 2025.

A pandemic-era bump



Total deer, elk, and combined unique hunters (left axis) alongside the nonresident share of deer/elk hunters (right axis), 2016–2025.

Every hunter category (deer, elk, and combined) peaked in 2021 reaching a decade high of 209,435 that year. Since 2021 the numbers have stabilized around 205,491 in 2025, similar to 2016 numbers. Resident deer/elk hunters decreased from 170,826 in 2016 to 166,610 in 2025 and nonresident deer-elk hunters increased from 33,949 in 2016 to 38,881 in 2025.

Nonresidents consistently comprise between 15% and 20% of the hunter base

- Nonresident elk-only hunters grew from 5,201 to 7,940 between 2016 and 2025.
- Nonresident deer-only hunters grew from 14,035 to 16,789 between 2016 and 2025.

Resident deer-only hunters decreased from 36,476 in 2016 to 25,679 in 2025 and resident elk-only hunters decreased from 9,571 in 2016 to 6,475 in 2025. The number of residents that held both deer and elk licenses increased from 124,779 in 2016 to 134,456 in 2025.

Metric	2016	2025	Change
Total deer hunters	190,003	191,076	+0.6%
Total elk hunters	154,264	163,023	+5.7%
Total deer/elk hunters (unique)	204,775	205,491	+0.3%
Nonresident share of deer/elk hunters	16.6%	18.9%	+2.3 pts
Resident deer-only hunters	36,476	25,679	-30%
Resident elk-only hunters	9,571	6,475	-32%
Resident deer AND elk hunters	124,779	134,456	+7.8%
Nonresident elk-only hunters	5,201	7,940	+52.7%

Source: Montana FWP workbook "Copy of 2016–2025 Unique Licensed Deer and Elk Hunters.xlsx" (user-provided data, Sheet1).

2. Deer and Elk License Holder Distribution, 2016–2025

Source workbook: "Licenses Holders Distribution (1, 2, 3, 4+)" — this one counts how many licenses each individual hunter holds in a season (1 through 8), split by resident/nonresident/overall, rather than counting hunters or licenses sold.

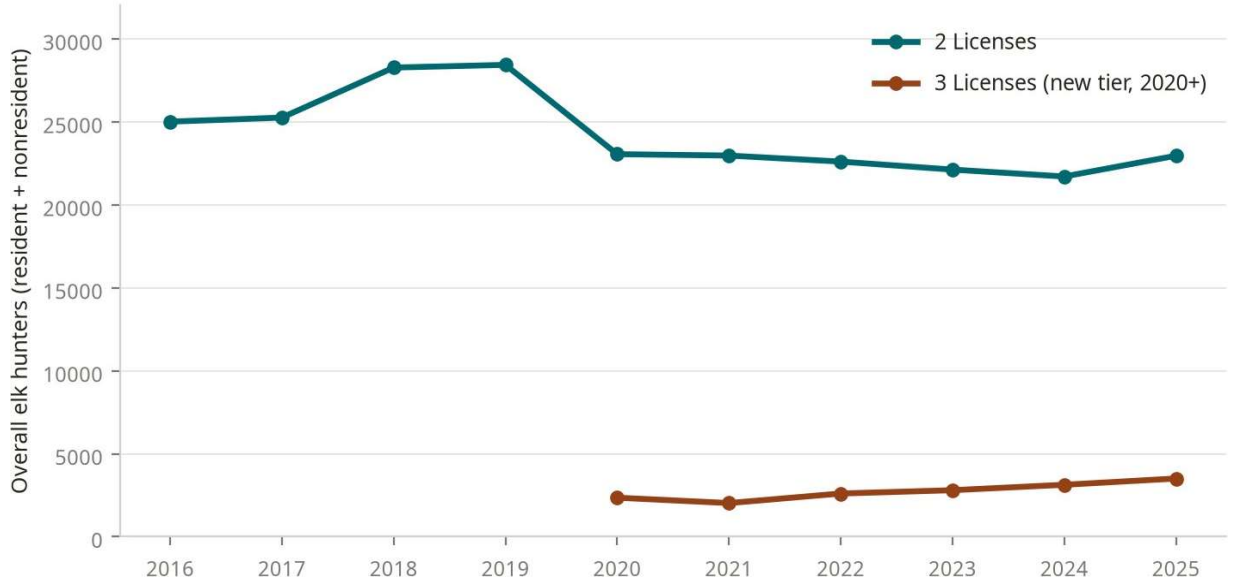
Number of deer licenses held by hunters are relatively stable

Most deer hunters buy just one license, which has remained stable over time ranging from 156,810 in 2016 to 156,758 in 2025. Hunters buying three or more licenses in a season increased from 9,079 in 2016 to 10,757 in 2025. In 2025, 4,191 resident deer hunters bought four or more licenses. Nonresidents were limited to three or fewer deer licenses in 2024 and residents were limited to three or fewer deer licenses in 2026.

A change in elk licensing structure

Prior to 2020 residents and nonresidents were only able to hold two elk licenses. In 2020 the total number of elk licenses a hunter could hold increased to three (87-2-501, MCA). Elk hunters holding one or two licenses declined in 2020 while the number of elk hunters holding three licenses was nominal and has increased slightly between 2020 and 2025.

Meanwhile, hunters holding one elk license increased from 129,835 in 2016 to 138,154 in 2025. Residents holding one elk license increased from 110,593 in 2016 to 116,674 in 2025 and nonresidents holding one elk license increased from 19,242 in 2016 to 21,480 in 2025.



Overall (resident + nonresident) elk hunters holding 2 vs. 3 licenses, 2016–2025.

Metric	2016	2025	Change
Deer — Overall 1 License	156,810	156,758	-0.03%
Deer — Overall 3+ Licenses	9,079	10,757	+18.5%
Elk — Resident 1 License	110,593	116,674	+5.5%
Elk — Nonresident 1 License	19,242	21,480	+11.6%
Elk — Overall 2 Licenses (2019 peak: 28,437)	25,015	22,961	-8.2%
Elk — Overall 3 Licenses (new tier, 2020: 2,352)	n/a	3,507	+49.1% (2020–25)

Source: Montana FWP workbook "Copy of 2016-2025 of Deer & Elk Licenses Holders Distribution (1,2,3,4).xlsx" (user-provided data).

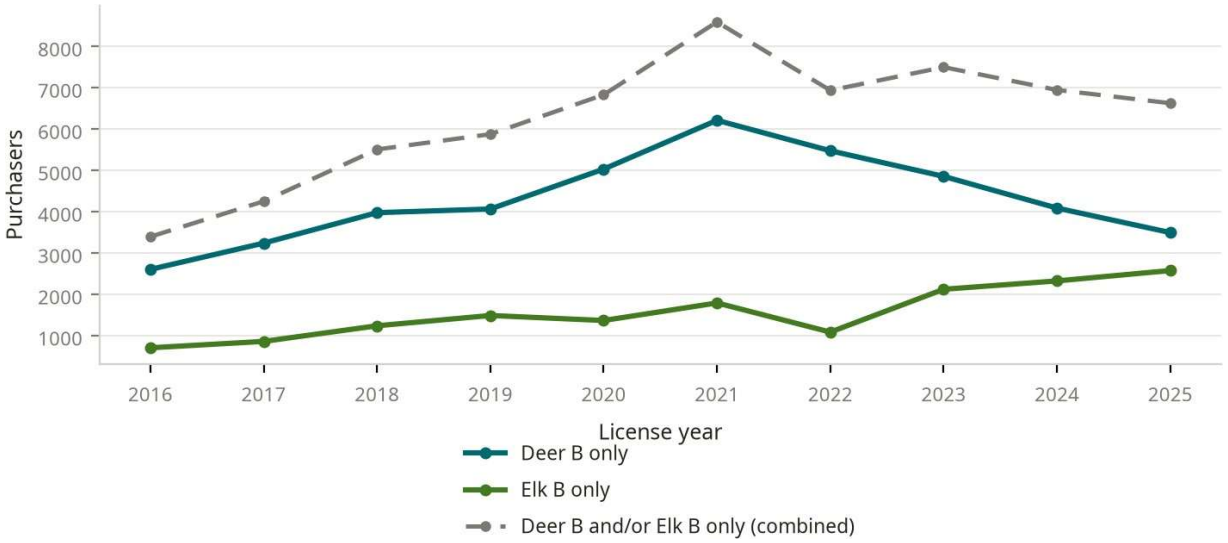
3. B-License-Only Purchases, 2016–2025

Source workbook: "NR B License Only Purchasers" — nonresidents who purchased only a deer or elk B license (no general or combo license) that season.

Another pandemic-era bump

Nonresident deer B only license purchasers rose steadily from 2,596 in 2016 to a decade peak of 6,205 in 2021. Since then, they have fallen steadily to 3,487 in 2025.

Nonresident elk B only license purchasers grew from 698 in 2016 to 1,784 in 2021, decreased to 1,078 in 2022 and increased to a high of 2,568 in 2025.



Nonresident purchasers of a Deer B license only, an Elk B license only, and the combined total, 2016–2025.

Metric	2016	2021 (peak)	2025	2016→2025
Deer B only	2,596	6,205	3,487	+34%
Elk B only	698	1,784	2,568	+268%
Deer and/or Elk B only (combined)	3,387	8,586	6,619	+95%
Elk share of combined total	20.6%	20.8%	38.8%	+18.2 pts

Source: Montana FWP workbook “Copy of 2016–2025 NR B License Only Purchasers.xlsx” (user-provided data, Sheet1).

4. Montana License Sales and HB 568, 2016–2025

Source workbook: “License Sales for HB 568 Hunters First Act” — every license type FWP sells (deer, elk, migratory bird, upland bird, and sportsman combos) for both residents and nonresidents, 2016–2025. Likely the data backbone for the HB 568 nonresident-impact study.

All license sales increased over the past 10 years

Total license sales rose in every major category over the decade:

- Resident total deer license sales increased from 208,224 in 2016 to 214,169 in 2025.
- Nonresident total deer license sales increased from 32,074 in 2016 to 34,001 in 2025.
- Resident total elk license sales increased from 158,855 in 2016 to 171,247 in 2025.
- Nonresident total elk license sales increased from 20,761 in 2016 to 23,554 in 2025.
- Resident migratory bird license sales increased from 23,212 in 2016 to 32,362 in 2025.
- Nonresident migratory bird license sales increased from 3,490 in 2016 to 5,539 in 2025.

- Resident upland bird license sales increased from 96,973 in 2016 to 116,245 in 2025.
- Nonresident upland bird license sales increased from 39,515 in 2016 to 45, 581 in 2025.

Category	2016	2025	Change
Total Deer — Resident	208,224	214,169	+2.9%
Total Deer — Nonresident	32,074	34,001	+6.0%
Total Elk — Resident	158,855	171,247	+7.8%
Total Elk — Nonresident	20,761	23,554	+13.5%
Migratory Bird — Resident	23,212	32,362	+39.4%
Migratory Bird — Nonresident	3,490	5,539	+58.7%
Upland Bird — Resident	96,973	116,245	+19.9%
Upland Bird — Nonresident	39,515	45,581	+15.4%
Nonresident Elk B License	1,753	4,337	+147.4%
Nonresident Deer B License (2021 peak: 13,523)	5,904	6,628	+12.3%

Source: Montana FWP workbook “Copy of 2016–2025 License Sales for HB 568 Hunters First Act.xlsx” (user-provided data). Bill text: archive.legmt.gov/content/Sessions/69th/Contractor_index/CH0493.pdf.

Initial data compilation prepared by Perplexity Computer from four Montana FWP workbooks uploaded by the user; combines and de-duplicates the four single-topic reports generated earlier in this session. Summary assessments by FWP staff.