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Whitetail Deer Management

By John Cook

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The deer management techniques that we use on our property have changed a lot over the past thirty years in relation with the changing deer herd. Whitetail deer numbers in the entire state of West Virginia have grown considerably and our land has been no exception.

We started shooting does in 1997 after the pictures from our scouting camera revealed that we were overloaded with does. Since then we have shot 22 does and only 7 bucks. Three of these bucks, two 8-points and one 10-point are the three largest antlered bucks that we have taken in the last thirty years. We had noticed that there were larger antlered bucks when the deer population had just started to climb in the eighties and then antler sizes began to decrease as the deer numbers grew too high and we were shooting the young bucks each year.

All of this made us realize that we needed to lower the deer population by shooting does and letting the young bucks grow up.

We are currently doing several different things in an attempt to have a well-balanced, healthier deer herd on our farm. These include:

Harvesting does.

Letting young bucks grow up.

Planting food plots to help boost the nutrition.

Mineral licks.

Keep records on the deer harvested and a log of the bucks seen during hunting season.

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Leave an area of sanctuary during the hunting season so that the deer are not pressured.

Provide a limited amount of shelled corn with automated wildlife feeders.

On some occasions we also cut down trees to provide browse in the winter and fertilize plants growing along the edges, especially the honeysuckle.

The Results

Since changing our hunting strategies we have noticed some changes for the better. We have seen bucks fighting, which we had seldom seen in past years and bucks have started reacting to calling, particularly grunting. We are finding shed antlers now; sheds are hard to find when they're just spikes. Also the numbers of bucks as compared to does caught on our scouting camera pictures has increased dramatically. This tells us that our buck to doe ratio is improving.

On the other hand, we still feel that our total deer numbers are too high. The body weights of the deer we are shooting are still low. The body weights of the three does that we shot in 1997 ranged from 65 to 85 pounds while the weights of the four does in 2003 varied from 55 to 82 pounds. Although we are not deer aging experts we do look at tooth wear to determine the approximate age of the deer. We usually look at the lower front teeth. A couple of the does that we've shot have had these lower front teeth worn all the way to the gumline.

Record Keeping

I believe that the records that we keep have given us a lot of valuable information. We record every buck that we see during hunting season. We include the date, time, number of points, location, person who saw buck, time, and rack width and characteristics. During the season of 2003 we recorded 87 buck sightings, of course many of these bucks showed up several times. It is neat to look back and see the bucks grow up that we have recorded. The rack characteristics are similar from year to year and allow us to identify many of the deer that we see. Most years I am able to look at this list and figure out an approximate number of different bucks that we have seen.

We have also kept deer harvest data since 1997 and I wish that I had started doing this earlier. This data includes the time, date, number of points, location, hunter, dressed weight, inside antler spread and approximate age. I think that we can tell a lot from the weight data and wish that we had kept track of the weights from the bucks that we had shot several years ago when we first got our scales. The weights of the bucks that we have shot since 1997 have ranged from 72 to 130 pounds. The 72 pound deer was a spike that my 9 year old son shot in 2002. The 130 pound buck was an 8–point that I killed in 2000. I knew that this buck was at least three and one–half years old and most likely a year or two older. I had watched this buck for the two previous years when he was a nice wide 6–point and had found one of his shed antlers in 1998. We also had a few pictures of him from our scouting cameras.

One suggestion that I would have for every deer camp would be to buy a set of scales. They provide a lot of information for the relatively cheap cost.

Whitetail Deer Management

Whitetail deer management is not difficult, is good for the overall health of your deer herd and a lot of fun.

You can read more about our deer management at my website

I have been deer hunting in West Virginia for close to 30 years. Now I am teaching my children to hunt and enjoy it more each year.

Aging Whitetail Deer At Various Stages

By David Selman, Tracker–Outdoors.com

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Aging a Yearling Deer Yearling deer can be easily aged by examining the third tooth back on either side of the jaw. This tooth is called the third premolar. If this tooth has three cusps, the deer is 1 1/2 years old. If the third premolar has only two cusps, the deer is 1 year and seven months old or older.

75% of deer harvested in the U.S. are yearling deer.

Telling the Age of a Whitetail Buck

In December of 1998, the Field and Stream magazine had an article that I found interesting about a method for aging deer in the field. Here is my short version;

The twisting and turning of a deer's ears results in permanent creases in the hair and skin around the base of the ears. Deer 2 1/2 years or younger seldom have ear creases. But by 3 1/2 years the hair has thickened and taken on at least one crease. A two crease deer is a mature animal and is usually between 5 1/2 to 6 1/2 years old. If a deer has three creases at the base of the ears, it is likely about 7 1/2 years old give or take a year. If a deer has 4 ear creases, it is likely more than 8 years old.

Also, as a deer ages, hair thickens in the ear slot. Finally, an older deer's ears tend to be more curled in and tired in appearance while a younger deer's ears will be flatter and more alert in appearance.

Telling the age of a deer with the ears method is most accurate on well conditioned animals.

Article By Tracker Outdoors

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None

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