

Deer Harvest Trends

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Interest in Quality Deer Management (QDM) has increased dramatically during the past decade and many states have implemented regulations to improve the health and quality of their deer herd(s) and habitat(s). Such regulations include buck harvest restrictions to reduce the harvest rate of yearlings and allow more bucks to reach older age classes, and increased antlerless opportunities designed to balance deer herds with the habitat.

In 2001 the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) produced a map showing the estimated deer density by county for the lower 48 states. The map also included deer herd and harvest information, the estimated number of deer-vehicle collisions and QDM trend information. The map contained data provided by state wildlife agencies from 1994 to 1999.

The map has been extremely popular as it is a valuable reference to compare relative deer densities, harvest data and other herd statistics among states. Recently, QDMA updated the map with information obtained from state wildlife agencies. The new map contains information from 2001 to 2005 and noticeable changes have occurred since the initial map was produced. The data set is not complete as a few states didn't provide data and some didn't provide all of the requested information, but the submitted information provides for meaningful comparisons among states and between the 2001 map and the present.

With respect to antlerless harvest, 1999 was a landmark year since it marked the first time hunters in the U.S. harvested more antlerless deer than bucks. In 1999 hunters harvested approximately 6.2 million whitetails, with bucks accounting for slightly less than half. In 2005 hunters harvested approximately the same number of deer but bucks accounted for only 44% of the total. From 1999 to 2005 buck harvest as a percentage of total harvest declined while the antlerless harvest increased by about 10%.

More importantly, the percentage of yearlings in the buck harvest declined from an average of 51% in 1999 to 45% in 2005. During this same period the percentage of 2.5-year-olds increased from 28 to 32% and 3.5-year-olds or older increased from 19 to 23%. Some states made tremendous advances such as Pennsylvania dropping from 80 to 52% yearling bucks. Wisconsin dropped from 68 to 51% and Mississippi dropped from 50% to a nationwide low of 12% yearlings! Kudos to the Magnolia state! Arkansas followed a close second with 20% yearlings. Pennsylvania used to lead this undesirable category but is now around the national average with at least six other states harvesting a higher percentage of yearlings, including neighbors Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Ohio (data not provided by Delaware or West Virginia). Michigan, New Jersey and New York now tie for the national lead with 63% of their buck harvests being 1.5 years old.

Two states regressed in this statistic with South Carolina and New Hampshire both harvesting a higher percentage of yearlings in 2005 than in 1999. South Carolina increased from 48 to 55%

and New Hampshire from 46 to 51% yearlings. In fairness to South Carolina, it was ahead of the curve in 1999 and is still doing well today especially considering that more than half of the state has a four-and-a-half-month season with no buck limit. Also, New Hampshire has already established a procedure to reduce their yearling harvest rate. In 2005 the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department published their 2006-2015 Big Game Management Plan and Objective 2-1 of that plan states, "Manage regional deer populations to ensure that yearling males don't exceed 50% of the adult male population." From 2004 to 2006 the percentage of yearling bucks had exceeded 50% of the buck harvest in one of the state's wildlife management units (WMU). Therefore, the Department organized an ad-hoc deer advisory committee to determine the preferred strategies for reducing the yearling harvest rate in that WMU, and they implemented the chosen strategy in 2007. This component of their deer management plan is arguably one of the most progressive QDM procedures implemented by any state agency, and since its implementation the percentage of yearlings in the buck harvest has dropped to 24% in that WMU and 45% statewide.

With respect to 2.5-year-olds, Maryland doubled their percentage in the harvest from 23% in 1999 to 46% in 2005. Nebraska increased from 29 to 56% and Indiana increased from 25 to 35%. Pennsylvania only separates their buck harvest into yearlings and 2.5 years and older, and the Keystone state improved from 20 to 48% bucks that were at least 2.5 years old. In actual numbers, these percentages represent an increase from nearly 39,000 to 58,000 bucks.

With respect to bucks 3.5 years old and older, Mississippi leads the nation with 60% of their buck harvest reaching this age category. This percentage has tripled in Mississippi since 1999. Texas is second with 49% and Arkansas is third with 38%. Other notables include Rhode Island with 37%, North Carolina with 28%, and Wisconsin jumped to 20% 3.5 years old or older (double their percentage in 1999).

Overall, Texas leads the nation in buck harvest by harvesting nearly 250,000 bucks and fortunately only 28% of them are yearlings. Michigan is second with nearly 220,000 bucks but unfortunately 63% of them are yearlings. Alabama and Wisconsin are next with approximately 183,000 bucks. Only 51% of bucks harvested in Wisconsin's are yearlings and age-class data wasn't provided by Alabama. Given Alabama's unlimited buck harvest regulations and season length in 2005, it is likely the percentage of yearlings was quite high. However, in 2007 the state took action and restricted the buck bag limit to three (one of which must have at least four points on one antler) per year in an effort to reduce their yearling harvest rate.

Antlerless deer harvests are more difficult to compare across states and years as some states are aggressively reducing populations while others are seeking to stabilize herds. From 1999 to 2005, one of the most notable statistics was the increase in antlerless harvest in the Midwest. Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Ohio and Missouri increased their antlerless harvests by an average of 78% from nearly 400,000 to over 710,000. Illinois and Iowa lead this list with 153 and 114% antlerless harvest increases, respectively. Overall Wisconsin leads the nation in this category by harvesting approximately 274,000 antlerless deer. Alabama is second with about 256,000 and Pennsylvania is third with 234,000. Pennsylvania's antlerless harvest is 27% higher than in 1999 but 38% lower than in 2003 when the state was aggressively reducing the deer herd.

One final comparison is to view each state's total deer harvest. In 2005, about 2/3 (65%) of the states shot as many or more antlerless deer than bucks, while 1/3 (35%) shot more bucks. Delaware topped the list with antlerless deer comprising 70% of their harvest. Georgia, Iowa, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Tennessee ranged from 66 to 69%, and Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin ranged from 60 to 65% antlerless deer. States such as Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont shoot fewer than 50% antlerless deer. This is not surprising in northern New England where lower deer densities combined with severe winter weather allow for successful deer management programs with reduced antlerless harvests. However, states with productive deer herds like Michigan, Nebraska and North Carolina should likely have harvests comprising more than 50% antlerless deer rather than the 40 to 47% they averaged in 2005.

A decade ago QDM was still in its infancy but its positive impacts on deer herds and habitats were becoming evident. Today, the QDM philosophy is not only growing in acceptance among hunters, but also shaping the future of deer hunting and management throughout North America. State wildlife agencies are urging sportsmen to play their role in balancing deer populations by harvesting female deer and hunters are increasingly answering the call. Many states also are responding to the increasing support by hunters for more restrictive buck harvest guidelines. Still more hunters are voluntarily restricting buck harvests on their properties beyond what is required by law. In our ever-changing world at least one thing is clear; today's hunters are far more knowledgeable about whitetails, their role in management, and their preference for QDM.

Aldo Leopold would be very proud.

The map and data referenced in this article will be available later this summer by contacting the QDMA at 800-209-3337 or www.QDMA.com

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