

"Hunters must do their part and shoot a few does"

"Got your buck yet?" A phrase heard throughout the mountains and pastures of Pennsylvania from the 1950's to the early 21st century is no longer "in vogue" for the modern deer hunter. Nationally, Whitetail deer populations have increased to an all time high, even more than before the pilgrims arrived.

In 1930, the U.S. population of Whitetail deer was estimated to be 300,000. Wildlife conservationists like Aldo Leopold and others intervened, thus began the modern movement of managing wildlife. Their first move was to stop the commercial exploitation of deer and introduce regulated hunting.

Recent estimates put the deer population in the United States around 30 million. Conservation practices have proved so successful that, in parts of the country, Whitetail deer populations currently far exceed their carrying capacity and have become considered a nuisance.

The current overpopulation of Whitetail deer is evident in many parts of Maryland. For example, MD DNR working with the City of Baltimore opened up Loch Raven Reservoir for bow hunting of whitetail earlier this year in an attempt to reduce the current overpopulation. On the local front, just recently I was asked by a resident to "come and hunt the deer on my property, they have eaten my whole garden and are now working on my shrubs."

Maryland's current Whitetail deer population is estimated at 228,000. During the 2007-2008 season deer hunters harvested 92,208 deer, an increase of less than 1 percent over the previous year's total harvest of 91,930 deer. Maryland deer hunters were successful in harvesting 15,880 (unofficial) deer on the opening weekend of firearms deer season.

According to MD DNR, in an effort to improve the quality of the deer herd they pursue, many hunters are voluntarily adopting a strategy called Quality Deer Management (QDM). QDM is a philosophy and management practice designed to help create a healthy deer herd that is allowed to develop toward its natural potential. The strategy involves harvesting an adequate number of antlerless deer and practicing the selective harvest of bucks in a manner that allows young bucks (yearlings) to reach maturity.

The ultimate goal of QDM is better deer and better habitat. Reducing the number of antlerless deer helps to improve the sex ratio within the herd and lessen impacts upon the habitat.

By utilizing these QDMA practices, we as hunters can make the largest positive impact on the environment. Through harvesting more does, the demand on the habitat is lessened, the number of deer auto collisions are reduced, damage to farm crops is minimized, and good quality meat is provide for family and friends.

According to Maryland deer hunting regulations, hunters can harvest more than 36 deer if they participate in all of the available seasons. While that may appear extreme, MD DNR feels this is what is required to gain control of the current Whitetail deer population. Most hunters do not aspire to fill each and every legal tag; however, if more hunters harvested a few extra does, the increased harvest would positively affect the goal of properly managed and balanced habitat. "Let that spike walk and shoot a few does," Brain Elyer, Deer Project Leader of Maryland DNR suggested recently while we were discussing the current Whitetail deer status in Maryland.

Whether you as a hunter believe in the benefits of QDM or not is irrelevant when it comes to harvesting does. Many arguments in deer camp and even on the internet, center on the issue of killing young bucks. This is a topic for another day and should not be confused with the harvesting of does for population control. The hunter, who holds out for a trophy buck and does not shoot a few does, is not doing his part in managing whitetail deer.

For the hunter who is now thinking, "We can't eat all of that venison," I've saved the best part of the equation for last. As it is and should be the hunter's responsibility to participate in the harvest of does in

order to control the whitetail population, the real winners can be those in society that currently may be in need of assistance.

Based on the Census Bureau survey, USDA estimates that in 2000, 10.5 million U.S. households did not have access to enough food to meet their basic needs. This is where hunters become the heroes, through programs like that of Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry (FHFH). Last year, Maryland deer hunters donated over 60 tons of venison.

C&L Deer Processing (410.374.6424) in Hampstead and Sam's Processing (410.795.4670) in Finksburg are currently FHFH participating butchers.

Deer Hunters can do their part to improve the habitat of the local fields and woods, help farmers reduce the amount of crop damage and loss, reduce the number of auto deer collisions, and supply food to many, just by harvesting a few does.

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