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To SHOOT or not to SHOOT may not be the question...

Deer season is almost upon us. We have waited for months — planting food plots, checking trail camera cards, perfecting arrow groupings, setting up tree stands and clearing shooting lanes. We do all of this work, wishing, praying, dreaming of the big buck we hope to put on the wall. But what if I told you that big buck is found in the harvest of does? That the high deer densities we have become accustomed to decrease the likelihood of harvesting a booner? What if our deer are eating themselves to a state of declining antler potential and increased predation?

I work with deer hunters all over Michigan, and I know that they care about our deer. They spend hours upon hours planting food and managing habitat. They spend thousands of dollars on equipment — both for hunting and the aforementioned habitat and food plot projects. While hard work is being done to provide deer with food, I also see drastic treelines on field edges, indicating deer are over-browsing their habitat. This degradation impacts forest regeneration and habitat for a whole slew of animals, including white-tailed deer.

While a lot of good is being done for deer, I am concerned about our deer. I understand there are areas where deer numbers are low. Epizootic hemorrhagic disease swept through and hit some areas incredibly hard in 2012. There are areas where deer numbers are lower due to targeted chronic wasting disease surveillance. In much of the Lower Peninsula however, there is room for a significant increase in doe harvest.

Decreased deer density has several benefits to deer. A primary value is that it decreases the browse pressure on the native vegetation and allows for continued regrowth. When forest areas are over-browsed, it prevents the forest from regenerating. The regeneration is what provides food to deer and other wildlife, along with cover that provides security during the hunting season and protection from predators. When does are not able to get the food they need over the winter and into spring (where woody browse is the primary food source) they start losing their ability to care for their fawns. Bucks enter into the spring behind on their energy reserves, resulting in less antler development.

Some other factors related to deer density include additional ruts. This can lead to fawns dropping over a longer period of time, which increases fawn vulnerability to predation and bucks going into the winter more worn out. Combining these two issues with high competition for food creates a very poor scenario.

Over time, high deer densities lead to bad outcomes, but how do we know if our deer densities are too high? By evaluating deer numbers and the impacts they have on local habitats, we can gather the information we need to determine a target harvest range for our doe populations. The four tools I recommend using to become informed about target doe harvest ranges include trail camera surveys, hunter observation data, harvest data, and browse-impact surveys. The combination of this data will equip you and your local deer hunters with a good idea of how many does you should target in a given season. Tracking

INSTEAD, let's ask how many we should SHOOT

by Anna Mitterling
MUCC Wildlife Cooperative Coordinator

this information over time will show you the impact you are having on the deer herd in your neighborhood and help you modify your harvest plans over time.

Trail Camera Surveys

One trail camera can be a very effective way to estimate deer numbers over a 100-acre area, but can also accurately measure the buck to doe ratio. To set up for a camera survey, you will need to establish a bait pile for seven to 10 days. August works well for the survey because bucks have antlers developing and fawns still have obvious spots. You will want to run a camera on your bait pile to make sure it is attracting deer to the location.

Make sure your camera is pointing to the north to avoid the sun backlighting your images and that it is about 15 feet away from the bait pile. You want to have the bait pile in the middle of your image so you can capture as many deer as possible. You also want to make sure the camera is only taking pictures every five minutes to avoid too many images to sort through. Once the seven- to 10-day period has passed and the deer are using the pile, start your 14-day survey. Once the 14-day survey begins, you should disrupt the site as little as possible. Only replace the memory card, place new batteries or refresh the bait pile if needed.

Once you have collected 14 days worth of images, you should look through all of them and tally up the number of unique bucks, total number of does and the total number of fawns. There is a data collection form at www.qdma.org that helps translate the number of deer into buck to doe ratios and estimates the total population of deer per square mile. You will want to repeat this survey each year to compare these numbers over time to identfy trends in population estimates. For more details on how to conduct a trail camera survey, check out the QDMA book "Deer Cameras: The Science of Scouting."

Please note that the survey is based on cameras set up at a bait pile. Please be sure to check the regulations on baiting in your area before using this method.

Hunter Observation Data

If you hunt any number of days in a given deer season, this data is the easiest to collect. You simply need to tally up the number of bucks, does and fawns you see, along with the number of hours you hunted. This "deer per hour" data is great to compare deer populations over the years and can help you determine if you are seeing more, less or similar numbers of deer.

Now, it is important to note that other factors play a role in how many deer you see — so you want to make sure you are comparing apples to apples. If you only track your observations in early-October one year and early-November the next year, you can't really compare those numbers. However, if you compare several days throughout multiple October hunts or opening gun weekend each year with data from previous years, your numbers will have more significance.

Harvest Data

Harvest data is quite easy to collect. Working with your neighbors, local QDMA branches and your local DNR biologist can really add value to your data, as the more data you collect the better. The basic information to collect is the number of deer (bucks, does, fawns) harvested around you, deer bones so you can determine age distribution and dressed weights, which provide some insight on the health of the deer. Noting if the does harvested were lactating or not will provide an indication of recruitment levels. If they were lactating, you know they had at least one fawn. Finally, measuring antlers for beam diameters, antler points and score can tell you information about their trends by age group (if getting jaw aged as well) over time. Most of this information is collected at a DNR check station. At the very least, consider taking your deer in to the DNR to get checked.

Browse-Impact Surveys

Evaluating browse does not have to be a complicated process. Simply going into the woods before the leaves come out and assessing deer browse for severity will provide valuable information. However, there is a standardized approach that has been created to evaluate browse impacts by deer that may be a little more complicated but can be conducted with little training.

To conduct a browse survey, you should esablish walking lines and set distances along those lines to stop and evaluate browse impacts. Typically, within a mile line, there will be fifty stops to collect data. At each stop, the severity of browse should be evaluated, canopy cover estimated and regeneration rates assessed. While walking the lines, deer scat can be tallied and converted into an estimate of deer numbers in the area. As with other data collection methods discussed in this article, the deer population estimates are best used as comparisons over time. More information about deer browse impact surveys can be found at www.mucc.org/cooperatives.

Another quick and easy way to evaluate the impacts deer have on plant growth, whether it be food plots or forests, is to install deer exclosure pens. These are used to keep deer out of particular areas so the browse impact can be compared to the surrounding non-fenced areas.

A Cooperative Approach

Remember, each of these methods is just one part of the data puzzle and should not be used as a stand-alone indicators of deer numbers. In addition, it may prove helpful to talk to your local DNR biologist to find out what deer densities they think are in your area and to talk to your neighbors as well. For more details on these evaluation methods, visit www.mucc.org/cooperatives.

Good deer management goes far beyond passing on shooting young bucks. If you hope to see mature bucks on your landscape, you must invest time and energy into understanding the population of deer in your woods and the impacts they are making on the habitat. Simply planting food plots is not enough. Doing habitat work while evaluating deer densities and impacts on your property isn't enough either since deer use many square miles of habitat. To truly have an impact on the deer in your woods, you must work with local hunters to evaluate deer numbers and impacts.

Once you have some data in front of you, you will be equipped to develop an action plan. For assistance starting a deer cooperative, please contact the author at amitterling@mucc.org. I would love to help you put together a plan to create a cooperative, and then evaluate the condition of your deer and the impact they are making on your local landscape. Together we can make Michigan deer hunting great, but we must work together.

QDMA members survey the landscape for deer sign during a cooperative event facilitated by MUCC and QDMA. Population data was gathered for future managment efforts.