

The biggest sporting event in the state began Saturday and runs through Dec. 4.

At least that's one way the state Department of Wildlife Conservation describes the rifle season for white-tailed deer. The 16-day rifle season typically accounts for well over half the deer killed in the state each year and involves more than 156,000 hunters.

The wildlife department reports that deer inhabit every Oklahoma county and number more than 500,000. The combined rifle seasons, including the early weekend hunt for young hunters and a December "holiday" season allowing harvest of does, took 65,871 deer in 2010, according to the department's annual Big Game Report. Hunters with archery equipment or muzzleloaders took the remainder to make up 2010 harvest total of 109,314. Rifles are the most efficient tools for killing deer and the annual season is timed to coincide with the breeding season, or "rut," to catch deer in their most vulnerable state. This year, following months of drought, biologists report that deer populations are healthy and, perhaps, somewhat easier prey. The hot, dry summer of 2011 means vegetation is more sparse, making deer easier to see, and a lack of natural foods means the deer have to travel more to find food and travel farther to, and may be more concentrated near, water sources, said state big game biologist Jerry Shaw. Numbers registered through the state's online check systems and at local check stations show that hunter kill with archery tools and muzzle-loading rifles so far is on-par, perhaps slightly less, than past seasons, Shaw said. "That's a very rough estimate," he said. Hunters who have private hunting areas with green food plots and corn feeders will have an advantage, he said. Likewise, hunters who hunt public areas that have received some rain and have green agriculture fields can target those food sources. The rut will have bucks on the move and in search for does the next two weeks. That makes it worth a hunter's time to stay in the hunting stand for longer periods of time. Bucks may chase does or "cruise" looking for a mate at nearly any time of day, even though the "crepuscular" animals are most active at

dawn and dusk. To hunt deer, Oklahoma residents must have a hunting license, or

proof they're exempt, as well as a \$20 deer gun license for each deer

hunted unless exempt. Nonresidents pay \$280 for a license to hunt deer with a

gun. Hunters may kill one buck and up to two antlerless deer depending on

the location they are hunting. Detailed regulations are contained in the Wildlife Department's annual

Hunting Guide available at locations where licenses are sold and online at [tulsaworld.com/wildlife](http://tulsaworld.com/wildlife) Kelly

Bostian 918-581-8357 [kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com](mailto:kelly.bostian@tulsaworld.com) SUBHEAD: Biologists report deer populations are healthy despite

has plagued Oklahoma.