

The most highly anticipated day of the year arrives Saturday for many thousands of Oklahoma hunters. The state's deer gun season officially begins a half-hour before sunrise Nov. 23. For many sportsmen and sportswomen, the 16-day season will be the best time to put meat in the freezer and maybe hang a trophy on the wall.

And some big-time trophies are certainly out there this year. "Gunner" Guner Womack, 18, of Morrison, will vouch for that. Just a few weeks ago, Womack took his bow out for an archery hunt on family land in Pawnee County. That evening, the Oklahoma State University freshman got his first-ever archery harvest and most likely a No. 1 ranking in the official Oklahoma Cy Curtis big game record book. Womack's buck green-scored 192 6/8 net, which if stands will put his name atop the list for Oklahoma's largest typical whitetail bucks taken with a bow. Overall, the state's deer population is in great shape this year, thanks to abundant (in some cases record-setting) spring rainfall and a fairly mild summer, said Big Game Biologist Dallas Barber with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. "Along with habitat conditions, deer numbers look good over most of the state. That means plenty of deer are moving about with the rut, or breeding season, underway. The rut has been going strong over the last two weeks across much of the state," Barber said. "While most does have been bred by the time gun season starts, it will not be uncommon to still see bucks seeking does that have yet to be bred." Deer hunting plays a major role in the Wildlife Department's deer herd management strategy. For the past several years, the Department has stressed the role deer hunters play with the slogan "Hunters in the Know! Let Young Bucks Grow!" Barber praised hunters for their voluntary participation, because every time a hunter decides to pull the trigger, he or she is making a management decision. This year, he is hoping hunters will harvest more does than they did in 2018. "It still remains as important as ever to place emphasis on doe harvest to keep a healthy, thriving population," Barber

said. Antlerless deer harvest becomes even more important in the state's deer management plan when populations grow. According to the 2018-19 Big Game Report published in the September/October issue of Outdoor Oklahoma magazine, hunters took 39,409 does, amounting to 36 percent of the 2018-19 harvest, well short of the 40-45 percent target range. Doe harvest helps keep populations in balance with available habitat, helps maintain healthy buck-to-doe ratios, and helps synchronize fawning when conditions are most favorable for fawn growth. To help hunters plan their opening-day outing in the deer woods, here are up-to-date regional reports from Wildlife Department field personnel.

NORTHWEST REGION Reported by Eddie Wilson, Wildlife Senior Biologist

Current Bucking Activity: Appears to have reached its peak last week. But mature bucks are still active and on the move. **Habitat Conditions:** Not much rain over the past couple of months, so dormant vegetation is very dry. Overall, habitat conditions are good. Early spring and late summer rains produced heavy cover and good food throughout the growing season. Winter wheat crops are in fair to good condition. **Hunter and Landowner Reports:** Hunters have reported good buck activity, saying bucks have been chasing does actively the past week. Landowners report good numbers of deer. Reproduction was good this year; most does have two fawns. **Public Land Best Bets:** Hunters need to consult regulations before hunting Oklahoma wildlife management areas. Some WMAs are closed opening weekend for controlled hunts, and some are closed to deer gun hunting entirely. Most WMAs are closed to antlerless hunting. If you have questions regarding hunting regulations on a wildlife management area, you can consult the Oklahoma Hunting Regulations Guide or call the biologist or game warden responsible for the area you choose to hunt. Phone numbers are listed in the regulations under each WMA listing. **Advice for Deer Hunters:** Be prepared for all types of weather. Be sure to sight in your rifle prior to the hunt. Plenty of open country in the northwest can make distances deceiving. Bring a rangefinder, and know your limits. Always use the wind to your advantage. Bring a deer cart, and be prepared to retrieve your deer. Introduce someone new to hunting.

Hunt safely and enjoy your time in the outdoors! Biggest Mistakes to Avoid: Try

not to move around a lot. Find a good spot, stay put and be

patient. Scout the area you intend to hunt prior to opening day. Be sure

you have checked the regulations for the WMA you intend to hunt. Opening Morning

Expectations: The weather forecast is for cooler temperatures, which should improve deer movement opening

weekend. Rut appears to have peaked in the northwest, however bucks should still be

actively searching for receptive does. Hunter numbers will likely be high on WMAs open

to public hunting. Good luck! NORTHEAST REGION Reported by Brent Morgan, Wildlife Biologist Current

Buck Rutting Activity: In the past week, buck activity has really picked up. Bucks

have been spotted checking out scrapes in the middle of the day. Deer have

been using food plots late in the evening, and acorns and browse during midday.

Deer activity will no doubt pick up with some cooler fronts pushing through the

region. Bucks are being seen chasing does at all times of the day. Mature

bucks are cruising midday looking for does in heat. Habitat Conditions: Habitat conditions look

great with lots of acorns available. But the soft mass is mostly gone because

of early freezes. The northeast had a very wet summer that produced food readily

available and abundant. Deer also have an abundance of browse where controlled burns were

conducted. Hunter and Landowner Reports: Most deer being observed are bucks with does or

bucks cruising looking for does. Very few does are seen alone. Deer are also

off their pattern trails as the bucks have pushed them away from their norm.

Public Land Best Bets: If you plan on hunting a WMA, make sure to

learn any special regulations for that area. All WMAs are not alike and donâ€™t

exactly follow the statewide regulations. WMAs will have more hunting activity than private land

so be cautious and aware of the area you are hunting because you are

more than likely sharing with fellow hunters. Cherokee WMA and Camp Gruber WMA are

always popular destinations for gun season but be aware those areas are open the

same as statewide dates but closed to antlerless harvest. Fort Gibson WMA has produced good harvest numbers in the past, but notice the boundaries when hunting and be aware this WMA is only open the first nine days and closed to antlerless harvest. Advice for Deer Hunters: Scouting is the best advice for hunters on opening weekend of gun season. Scout for food sources around or near buck sign as that will be your best shot at locating a buck. If hunters are persistent and have done their scouting homework, there is no reason they shouldn't harvest a nice buck. Calling and rattling can also be effective in luring in a lone buck. Biggest Mistakes to Avoid: Scent control is very important; hunt the wind direction. Hunters are reporting that the does are busting them by catching their scent, so be careful about scent control. A hunter rushing their shot on a deer or forcing it through a marginal spot can result in a crippled animal and a tag unfilled. Opening Morning Expectations: It should be the tail end of the rut on opening morning with a few does that might still be in season. But it should be a great opening morning of gun season as long as the weather cooperates. Visibility is great as we have experienced some hard freezes and most of the leaves have fallen. The WMAs should have a good number of hunters, but persistence is the key. Stay as long as you can as the deer movement has been very good midday. CENTRAL REGION Reported by Matt Mattioda, Wildlife Biologist

Current Buck Rutting Activity: Colder weather and shorter days made for great rutting activity through the first two weeks of November. Habitat Conditions: Record-setting rainfall in 2019 provided an equally heavy acorn crop over most of the region. Both red and white oak species have produced an above-average crop in many areas. Highly preferred browse and soft masts like persimmons are also abundant. There was also above-average cover production this year. Grasses will provide plenty of cover for deer when they are outside of wooded areas. Hunters who prefer to hunt from the ground should keep this in

mind as visibility may be more difficult this year. Hunter and Landowner Reports: Great deer movement the past two weeks. Successful hunters have reported that they are seeing lots of buck movement throughout the day, not just early or late. Public Land Best Bets: Kaw Wildlife Management Area is always the biggest producer in the central region. Keystone WMA provides a lot of access and opportunity. The Texoma WMA areas of Washita Arm, Love Valley, Fobb Bottom, Tishomingo and Hickory Creek collectively provide a lot of hunting access for southern Oklahoma hunters. Please keep in mind that WMAs in the region experienced record flooding this year, and conditions on these areas may not be like what hunters have experienced in the past. Most of the agricultural lessees were unable to plant crops, and high water levels suppressed the growth of cover along river bottoms. Scouting may be more important this year than in the past in order to have a successful hunt on the WMAs that experienced flooding. Be sure to consult hunting regulations before heading out. WMA-specific regulations can be found on the Department website, in the annual hunting regulations guide, or on the new Go Outdoors Oklahoma mobile app. Do not hesitate to contact the area biologists with any questions, as they are always willing to help. Advice for Deer Hunters: Take time to scout before going hunting. Look for food sources that are being used, as well as other deer sign such as scrapes and rubs. Many hunters like to take advantage of the extended shooting range that gun hunting provides, causing them to hunt in larger openings. But if deer in your area are feeding on acorns, you will likely have better success hunting in timber. The rut will be winding down throughout gun season, which will cause bucks to move more throughout the day in search of does. Sit as long as you can, because much of this movement will occur midday. Biggest Mistakes to Avoid: Underestimating a deer's sense of smell. Not scouting beforehand; even tried-and-true spots may have changed over the course of the year. Shooting lanes may need to be cleared, straps may need to be

replaced on tree stands, etc. Not sighting in the gun before going hunting; missing

your target is better done on the range than from the deer stand. A

list of WMAs that have shooting ranges can be found on the Department website.

Lastly, leaving your stand too early or getting there too late. Opening Morning Expectations:

The rut will be slowly winding down, but deer movement should be great if

the weather cooperates. Does will be returning to food sources, and bucks will be

traveling in between, searching for receptive does. Hunters should expect a great opportunity at

harvesting a deer. SOUTHWEST REGION Reported by Ron Smith, Wildlife Senior Biologist Current Buck

Rutting Activity: General deer movement increased in the days leading up to muzzleloader season.

Does have been seen moving throughout the day along with young bucks. Mature bucks

are becoming more active chasing does and sparring with their rivals. Rut activity seems

to be making steady progress with no real spike observed yet. If the current

pattern holds, rut activity should be in full swing for opening weekend. Habitat Conditions:

Habitat conditions vary considerably with the westernmost portion being very dry. Early spring rains

did produce heavy cover that will be quite a change from 2018. Winter wheat

is in good condition across the eastern side but poor across the west. In

areas with mast production, spring rains produced good crops. Hunter and Landowner Reports: Landowners

report seeing does and young bucks throughout the day on winter wheat and other

areas with good food. Mature bucks are beginning to make an appearance early and

late during cooler evenings. Most landowners are seeing a steady increase in deer numbers

over previous years. Hunters have been monitoring active scrapes since the third week of

October and observing a steady increase in bucks following does. Many hunters have reported

deer in great condition. Public Land Best Bets: Black Kettle, Packsaddle and Ellis County

are the top three WMAs in the region for gun season. Altus-Lugert and Fort

Cobb WMAs are also open to shotgun with slug. Advice for Deer Hunters: Be

prepared to stay all day. As we move further into peak rut, any time

of the day can be productive. Always use wind to your advantage when planning entry and setup for the hunt. Spend as much time as possible scouting all the elements of your hunt area. Be aware of property boundaries and regulations for both private land and public. Be patient. Biggest Mistakes to Avoid: Leaving the field early can lead to missed opportunity. Not accounting for changing weather and wind conditions may take you out of the game. Opening Morning Expectations: Depending on weather, hunters should see good deer activity as the rut progresses. Deer health and body size appear to be excellent. SOUTHEAST REGION Reported by Jeff Ford, Wildlife Senior Biologist Current Buck Rutting Activity: Bucks are in full rut. Most mature bucks are with does, and younger bucks are traveling looking for does. Large bucks are also on the move looking for new does. Habitat Conditions: Conditions are excellent. The rain and freezing temperatures have put most acorns on the ground. Some areas have received more rain than others, so it's pretty wet. Hunter and Landowner Reports: Hunters are seeing a lot of deer moving at all times of the day as the rut is in full swing. There are good numbers of mature bucks and does with yearlings being seen. The deer numbers are high in most areas. Public Land Best Bets: Three Rivers and Honobia Creek WMAs; Wister WMA; Ouachita WMA (Le Flore and McCurtain units). Advice for Deer Hunters: Look for a good food source near thickets. Go early and stay as long as possible. Keep human odor to a minimum. Look for buck sign as the bucks are still checking scrapes and making rubs. Please use safety equipment when hunting from a tree stand. Biggest Mistakes to Avoid: Moving too much, as the deer are being pressured almost daily. Do plenty of pre-season scouting. Don't assume deer only move early and late; the middle of the day is usually the best time to hunt on land with heavy pressure. Be sure and check the deer hunting regulations for your region and area. Don't assume land not posted is OK to hunt. Opening Morning Expectations: Opening day always has the

most deer harvested by far. The forecast predicts rain Friday, so opening morning could be muddy. This should be another great year for hunters. We have great deer numbers, and the rut is underway. There is a bumper crop of acorns, so the deer are going to be up feeding during the day. Get out and have some fun, be safe and make some memories. * * * Hunters are reminded that online E-Check of all harvested deer is required using the Go Outdoors Oklahoma website or mobile app. All hunters who have yet to confirm their account status on Go Outdoors Oklahoma are strongly urged to do so before going afield; this will allow any issues with accounts to be addressed before the need to E-Check arises. For Go Outdoors account help, call (405) 521-3852 from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays or (833) 457-7285 until 8 p.m. weekday evenings or from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekends. Any hunter needing a regular hunting license or deer license can log on to Go Outdoors Oklahoma or use the mobile app for immediate sales. With the Go Outdoors Oklahoma app, electronic licenses carried on a mobile device are now legal in the field. For complete information and license requirements, consult the current Oklahoma Hunting and Fishing Regulations Guide found online at wildlifedepartment.com, on the Go Outdoors Oklahoma free mobile app for Apple or Android devices, or in print across the state wherever hunting and fishing licenses are sold. Follow me on Twitter @SkiatookJournal. E-mail lindsey.chastain@skiatookjournal.com Be the first to know Get local news delivered to your inbox! Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.