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Doe Management Equals Deer Management

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What does “doe management” mean? Among most wildlife professionals, doe management is synonymous with antlerless deer harvest. Antlerless harvest should be one of the most important components of a deer management plan. While most hunters and clubs realize the importance of managing bucks on their property, many fail to realize the importance of managing antlerless deer as well. Many things can be accomplished with an adequate antlerless harvest, all of which ultimately affect the buck population. A balanced sex ratio, shorter and earlier breeding season, increased reproduction and recruitment, and improved herd health are a few of the objectives that can be met with proper antlerless harvest.

Wildlife biologists often encounter concerns about antlerless harvest recommendations when assisting private landowners and hunting clubs with developing deer management plans. Hunters and landowners are often reluctant to harvest does because they are afraid they do not have enough deer. This misconception can often be dissuaded with sound information concerning general deer biology and the affects of antlerless harvest.

One population characteristic that is greatly affected by antlerless harvest is the adult sex ratio. Why is a balanced sex ratio important? If there are a disproportionate number of does in a deer herd, it is reasonable to assume all will not be bred in a timely manner. Many does will not breed and conceive on their first estrous cycle because there are not enough adult bucks in the population. These does may not be bred until their second, third or later estrus. The result is a long protracted breeding season. Also, these does will give birth later in the year than does that conceived during their first estrous cycle. These late summer, early fall born fawns typically encounter vegetation that is generally poorer in quality and quantity as it “hardens off” for winter. This causes most late born fawns to come out of their first winter in poorer condition than early born fawns. In addition, many late born bucks will have

poorer antler development as 1½ year olds than fawns born earlier in the year. With an extremely unbalanced sex ratio, some does may not breed at all.

Too many does also means the bucks will have to do very little searching for breeding opportunities, reducing a hunter's chance of seeing a buck. When the number of does greatly exceeds the number of bucks, the bucks do not have to compete for the right to breed. This reduces the number of rubs and scrapes observed during the hunting season. Prolonged breeding seasons wear bucks down more than a shorter, more intense rut. Bucks in this situation enter late winter and early spring in much poorer physical condition. These bucks face a much tougher recovery period in the spring and summer, which can affect antler development and body weights the following year.

A given habitat can only support a certain number of deer in healthy condition. If the number of deer exceeds this level, habitat degradation and poorer herd health result. About one-third of a deer herd should be removed each year to maintain the population at a stable level. If the sex ratio is balanced, doe harvest should make up between 40 and 60 percent of the overall harvest to maintain this healthy balance. After only a few years of aggressive antlerless harvest, doe sightings may decline. Many hunters fear the decreased sightings are a result of drastically reduced deer numbers, when in fact; they have only educated the surviving does with the increased hunting pressure.

Fawn production and recruitment typically increase as a result of doe management. Does usually begin breeding at 1½ years of age, and if healthy, will reproduce each year until they die. Fifty does in good condition produce more fawns than 100 unhealthy does. Additionally, fawns produced by healthy does tend to have higher survival rates than fawns born to does in poor condition.

When deciding to harvest does, hunters must be careful to avoid harvesting buck fawns or "button" bucks. This can easily be accomplished with just a little practice at identification. Hunters can learn to tell the difference between adult does and fawns by observing body shape and size. By waiting until several deer are present, a size comparison of the deer can be made. Additionally, adult does typically have longer

and larger faces than fawns. The shape of the head on most buck fawns is flatter than a doe's head and the developing pedicels or "buttons" are often visible upon close observation. Behavioral cues may help distinguish age classes of antlerless deer; fawns are usually more playful than adults and are generally not as cautious. Plus, fawns are often the first deer to arrive at a feeding area.

Managing antlerless deer harvest is just as important as managing buck harvest. As a matter of fact, a good deer management plan will always place equal importance on managing bucks and does. Often, in their attempt to meet harvest goals, hunters may forget that hunting does that have been pressured can be just as difficult as trying to harvest a mature buck. Don't overlook this opportunity to enjoy a challenging and exciting hunt when trying to improve your deer herd.

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