

Are You Managing For Cattle Or Deer?

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World: Dr. James C. Kroll examines new principles of deer management.
By Dr. James C. Kroll

My career now stretches over 3 1/2 decades. Over the years, it's been my pleasure to see interest in deer management grow to exponential proportions. This is especially true since the first issue of North American Whitetail came out in 1982, but even before that I remember the first talk I ever gave on deer management in 1978. It happened in an abandoned rock schoolhouse in Copperas Cove, Texas. Eight people attended from the surrounding ranches.



As I youthfully presented newly discovered principles of deer management, I could tell right away that we were getting nowhere! Afterwards, the attendees were very complimentary about my talk. However, I walked away knowing full well that they did not buy into any of it. My greatest sin was to put forward the "foolhardy" notion that it was necessary to shoot does. Later, during the same talk to some east Texas hunting clubs, an old woman picked up a biscuit and hit me right between the eyes. "Who is your mother?" she asked.

"Doe harvest is a critical component to modern deer management," Dr. Kroll says. "You should always remove at least as many does from your herd as you do bucks."

THE SACRED DOE

The world clearly was not ready for doe harvest! We've come a long way since then, and North American Whitetail has done a lot over the years to convince hunters about the importance of shooting does to maintain proper balance. Despite the progress we've made, though, I recently received an e-mail from a fellow in Mississippi who was desperate for ammunition that would help him get his hunting club members to shoot more does. In Pennsylvania, hunters still come out in large numbers anytime the subject of doe harvest or protecting young bucks is proposed. So I have to wonder: Have we really made any progress? The following discussion touches on some of the incredible comments and false dogma I encounter on a weekly basis.

"YOU ONLY NEED ONE BULL TO BREED YOUR COWS"

This is a particularly irritating comment to hear. For some strange reason, there are still people who think deer and cows are the same thing. "Whatever works for cows surely must work for deer," they insist, not realizing that deer management and cattle management have two completely different goals.

The goal of a cattleman is to produce calves, the sex of which is usually unimportant. The goal of the deer manager is to produce bucks. Indeed, with deer, the sex of offspring is very important! Furthermore, although it's true that it only takes one bull to breed a large number of cows, the breeding system and physiology of deer and cattle are very different. Cattle come from a species that characteristically exhibited a harem breeding system. Bulls fought for dominance and then herded as many cows as possible into their breeding harem.

Whitetails, on the other hand, fight for individual breeding rights. Since bucks do not have harems, while one buck is breeding one doe, another may be taking advantage of another nearby doe. Further, bucks are not sexually equipped to breed large numbers of does. The ratio of body size to scrotum size for bulls is much higher than with whitetail bucks.

For many years, we've been involved in whitetail semen collection research. Whereas you can routinely obtain 200 or more straws of semen from a single bull collection, our average semen straw production for whitetail bucks is only 38. Bucks simply cannot breed as many females as bulls. Pen studies clearly show that the breeding of more than 12 does in any one season by a single buck can seriously affect his antler size in subsequent years. And once the sex ratio (antlered bucks to does) falls below one buck per four does, we see a serious reduction in reproductive success.

