Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

The United States of Deer

Part 1

By Dr. James C. Kroll

A critical look at where deer management is going.

This is an article I have been considering for many years, so trust me, some thought has gone into it. I have been actively involved in deer hunting, management and the businesses associated with the "deer world" for almost four decades. I have been blessed to have worked with deer in every state and province from Mexico to Canada, so I have seen a lot. A great deal has happened since a young graduate of Texas A&M University took over the reins of the wildlife management program here at Stephen F. Austin State University. In fact, we collectively have learned more about whitetails and have changed more about the sport of hunting them since 1970 than in all the years preceding. I just returned from a five state tour, each of 17 nights presenting a three-hour talk on deer management. More often than not, the most commonly asked question was, "Where is all this going?" So, it's time to tackle this important question. Where IS deer management going? What are the trends? And, how will these trends affect you in the next four decades?

The Whitetail Landscape

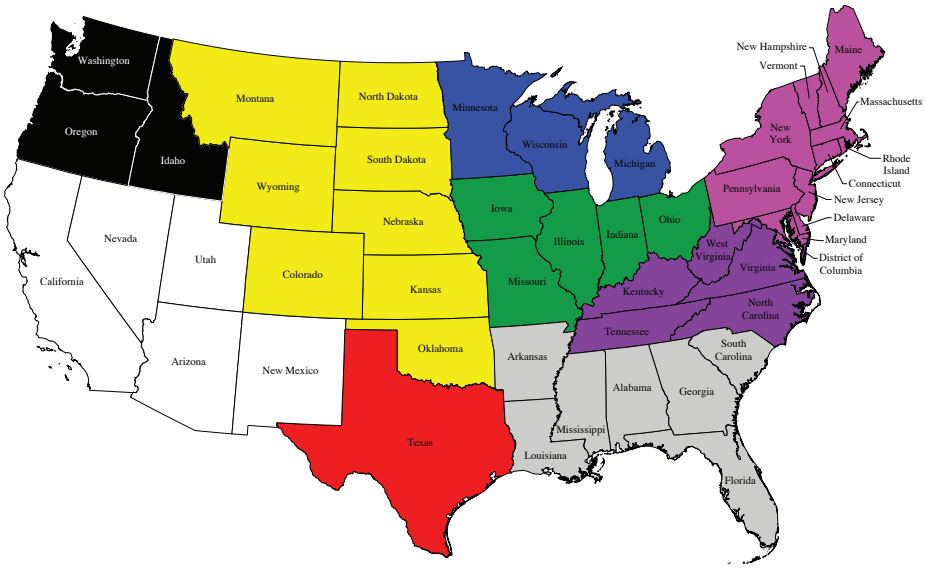
I chose the title of this issue's column very carefully. When you consider the trends in deer management, there's really no generalized pattern to the subject. It very much is geographically based. So, in my opinion there are eight states in Whitetail USA (see map). Each "state" has its own unique situations, conditions, culture, and traditions; so you have to consider these factors in assessing where exactly management will go in each.

The Northeast

Of the eight total deer states, the northeast definitely faces more challenges than any other. In fact, this area will become, in my opinion, mostly unmanageable by the end of this decade. Fragmentation and urban growth present significant challenges and impediments to effectively managing whitetails, and represents a serious challenge to deer hunting. High human population densities, loss of rural lifestyles, and the rise of the "urbanian" mentality all are significant issues. In many areas, deer have become viewed more as vermin than game animals.

Suburban neighborhoods often are equally split on what to do with deer. Half want to protect and supplementally feed deer, while the remainder wants them to disappear. One lady approached me at an airport near New York City. I obviously was a hunter, so as she approached me with her two daughters in tow, I was a bit apprehensive. "Are you a deer hunter," she queried. I swallowed hard and proudly proclaimed, "Yes, I am." Bracing for the worst, I was shocked by her response. "Why aren't you guys killing more of them?" She then went on to inform me how deer had destroyed her landscape and gardening had become a thing of the past.

Deer populations in the northeast are much too high. Frankly, after considering the various solutions to controlling deer in this region, I cannot come up with any workable solution. It's a grim prospect to consider. Habitats are degrading at an alarming rate. In the few areas where forests are managed, it's impossible to regenerate desirable species. Eastern landowners have to erect high fences to get acceptable oak reproduction. Centerfire rifles are totally out of the question, leaving only bows, shotguns, and muzzleloaders as hunting weapons. Hunter numbers are declining, as the average age increases. From a political standpoint, DNRs have to deal with the ramifications of a long-standing public hunting culture. "Venison in every pot" mentality has created a group of sportsmen who feel they have a right to hunt anywhere they please, and anyone purchasing a license or permit



According to the author, there are eight other "states" alongside Texas in his United States of Deer. Each has its own management strategies and trends that will impact hunters over the next 40 years.

should be able to kill a buck.

The only portion of the northeast still available for management lies along the western edge of New York and Pennsylvania. This area still contains some large tracts of land and is inhabited mostly by somewhat rural people. This area has become a stronghold for Quality Deer Management (QDM), which is encouraging. QDM will provide a stopgap for the ultimate demise of deer hunting for the northeast. So, what will be the fate of this region?

It's my prediction, the northeastern whitetails never will disappear; however, deer populations, habitat quality, and overall herd health will degrade to what I refer to as a "stagnant" deer herd. Whitetails will indeed become "raccoons with antlers."

The Northern South

This region includes Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina. This region is unique in its cultural heritage and mostly rural lifestyle. Much of the rural heritage has been preserved principally by topography. The Appalachian Mountains, Piedmont, and other rough land features have prevented development in most of these states. This mountain culture has supported a tradition focused on public hunting opportunity. Some excellent bucks have come from this region, and there are reasonable opportunities for management by state agencies. Management challenges include habitat, site and soil conditions and the public hunting tradition.

This region appears to be diverging into two distinctly different management scenarios. The first is public hunting. Even in this highly rural area, fragmentation and increased posting of private land present significant challenges. This is a region crying for antler restrictions. It's also an area where state-managed lands offer great potential for providing quality hunting experiences, if state agencies realize the trend is toward quality and not quantity.

Agencies will have to become better deer managers than they are at present. This is one of those situations in which I'm not sure what will happen. At worst, deer hunting will remain active for at least two more decades, even though quality may decline. The possible salvation might turn out to be declining hunter numbers, which will translate to more opportunities for the "survivors."

In the western portion of this region, there remain excellent opportunities for QDM. Excellent soils and habitats, coupled with changing land use more towards recreation than agriculture, could mean increased production of trophy class animals. Along the Ohio River, for example, there are several well-managed properties that have produced some of the best bucks ever seen in that region. Virginia remains a wild card to the east. Agency biologists in Virginia are well-trained and supportive of private management, but must deal with conflicting hunting traditions such as dog-hunting, private lands, and public access. In spite of these challenges, however, Virginia remains a bright hope and good example of agency deer management.

In general, my prediction is this region will see an increase in innovative deer management strategies such as antler restrictions, "earn a buck," bonus tags, and special seasons (eg., youth hunting). Except for the western portion of the region, however, I do not see large numbers of trophy-class bucks being taken in this region.

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The Deep South

This region includes most of the traditional Confederate States, excluding Texas. Deer management is well rooted in this region, and there's an abundance of undeveloped lands. Most of the hunting takes place on hunting clubs, some of which go back to the days of plantations. In my opinion, this area represents some of the most difficult deer hunting in the entire range of the species. Show me a hunter who consistently kills mature bucks, and I will show a person who can clean out South

Texas and the Midwest. The average shot distance is less than 50 yards.

I'm seeing an alarming trend in this region. Second only to Texas, deer management has been around a very long time, primarily due to the existence of so many clubs. Yet, in spite of years of deer management, members are not seeing the progress they anticipated. I'm spending more and more of my time in this region, "fixing" problems created by improper application of deer management principles. The Deep South has more potential than almost anywhere for two reasons. First, true killing frosts do not occur until very late, making cool season crops productive for almost seven months. Next, in most years rainfall exceeds 45 inches, and it's distributed as evenly as possible across the year.

There also are significant problems. Since management has been in play for the second longest period of time (Texas longest), there's a strong tendency toward what I call "management fatigue." One of the negative sides to deer management is people quickly discover it's a whole lot of work. And, it takes time to see results. That is why folks tend to go for the more glitzy aspects such as culling and planting the latest "magic bean."

Next, although there are large numbers of private, single-owner properties being managed, most of the management occurs on hunting clubs who traditionally have leased lands from timber companies. An alarming trend is taking place, however. Large timber company holdings are being sold off to TIMOs (Timber Investment Organizations) and REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts), who are not as interested in their lessees as the companies were. Further, these investment organizations by their nature are selling off the best lands and will further subdivide the remainder in the next 15 years.

Finally, as with other regions, hunters are aging and the demographics of southern clubs are changing. Older members are more interested in just being at the club than killing a deer. That makes management very difficult.

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So, my prediction for the Deep South is continuation of mediocre management for the next decade, leading to less and less quality bucks. There will be the shining examples, sure, but for the most part I do not expect a great deal out of the Deep South.

That completes my analysis of the eastern portion of the United States of Deer. I have given this article a great deal of thought and I hope you have benefited so far. Next issue, I will move westward, sharing my experiences and thoughts on the future of whitetail management in these areas.

