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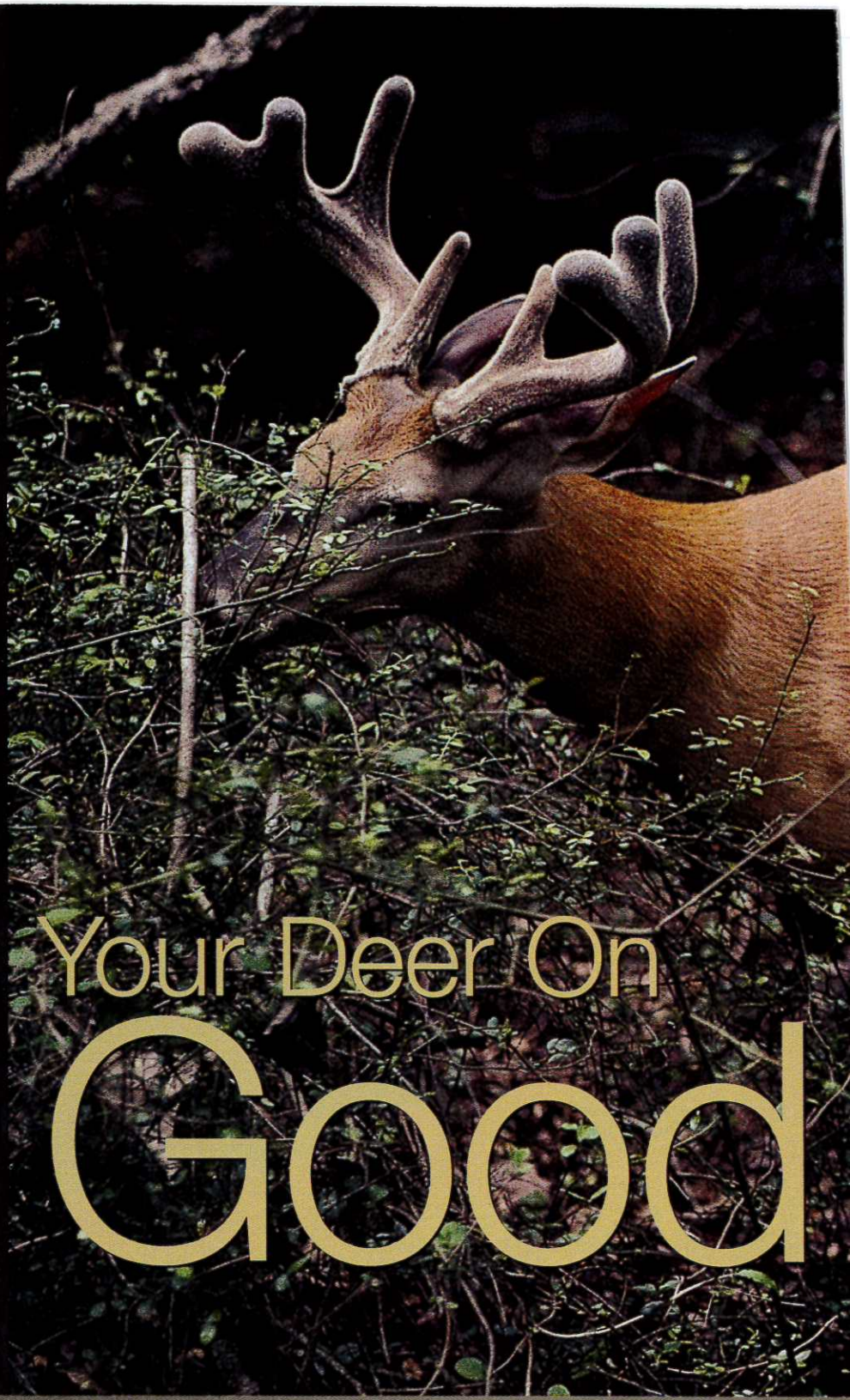
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If your deer are not getting the protein they need, you can help them make it through critical stress periods by using supplemental forages and food-source management.



Are Your Deer On A Good

by Dr. James C. Kroll and Ben H. Koerth

For a number of years now, North American Whitetail has been actively promoting the idea of food-source management for deer on private land. This simple concept is based on the fact that a whitetail's health and size can be improved by providing it with quality nutrition every day of the year.

All deer enthusiasts are interested in a healthier herd, so this is an easy idea to support. But how do you determine what needs to be done on the land you manage?

Many of the most preferred whitetail forages are broadleaf herbaceous plants. This huge category of annuals and perennials includes many weeds, along with peas, beans, clovers, vetches and other legumes (cultivated or otherwise), and chicory. Unfortunately, many native plants in this category are becoming rare in portions of the whitetail's range because of overbrowsing.

While grasses are far less preferred overall, some cultivated grasses, including oats and wheat, are heavily utilized at certain times of year. Other categories of forage include many types of browse (the twigs and leaves of woody plants), mast (the fruit of woody plants), and fungi (mushrooms).

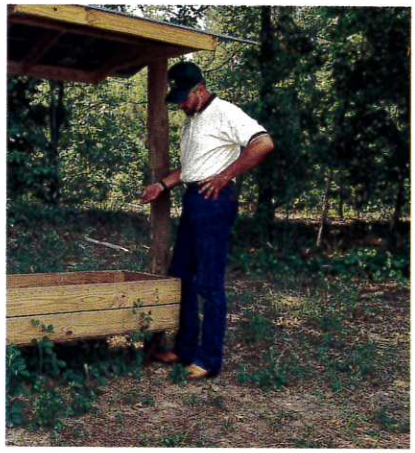
Once you have an idea of what you're looking for, simply walk around your property, stop at regular intervals and ask yourself this basic question: "What is there for deer to eat at this location, all year?"

In evaluating habitat, remember that you only need to look at what we refer to as the "deer zone": the area within which a deer can actually forage. In most cases, it will be from ground level to a height of about 4 1/2 feet, which is roughly the height an adult deer can reach while on all fours. To a feeding deer, anything growing out of its reach is irrelevant. The only way other vegetation can enter the diet is for it to fall from the sky, as occurs seasonally with mast and more sporadically with storm-toppled tree branches.

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If too many deer are present, they can quickly decimate the preferred forage within their reach. Thus, when you see a well-developed understory with a good mixture of desirable plant species that provide food and cover, you can generally assume that the deer density is low to moderate. Conversely, high-deer-density areas have an open understory containing virtually no desirable vegetation within a deer's reach. It often appears as if the trees have been purposely trimmed at the maximum height deer can reach. This is a browse line.

In places where deer have been allowed to exist at dangerously high population levels for many years,



Supplemental feeding might include planting high-protein food plots, but it might also be necessary to feed your deer pellets. Here, Dr. Kroll inspects a feeder. Photo by Michael Skinner.

there will be a pronounced browse line. In areas that receive a lot of snow, the height of this line is determined by how deep the snow pack becomes; more snow lets deer get to vegetation they otherwise could not reach. As a result, we have seen browse lines 8 feet high in parts of the Great Lakes region.

(You sometimes will see a browse line along the edge of a food plot, even in an area that has plenty of nutritious deer forage. Why? In some cases, it is due to the fact that whitetails like to spend a lot of time loafing around the edges of plots, as well as staging in them prior to entering the plot itself. This can suggest that the area has too many deer, when in fact it might well be appropriately stocked.)

When is food-source management necessary? The answer depends on whether or not you have a nutrition problem that will require significant actions to increase the productive capacity of your land. However, we rarely see a property that does not need at least some help in producing more deer forage.

Food-source management is not a substitute for population control. Healthy whitetails only occur where deer numbers are within the productive capacity of the habitat. In many situations you can significantly raise that capacity through proper management of the habitat, but it is still advisable to not let deer numbers get out of line.

True monster bucks nearly always come from areas with relatively low populations and an abundance of food. A classic example is Milo Hanson's current world-record typical buck (net score 213 5/8 Boone and Crockett), which was taken near Biggar, Saskatchewan, back in 1993.

In Canada, the frequency of winterkill guarantees a herd that is considerably smaller in number than the fertile farm country can grow enough food to support. Because of low populations, every deer is assured of having enough to eat. The periodic deep snow cover, not the cold, is what kills deer in such environments.

Every state has biologists whose job it is to know the state's deer herd and habitat conditions. They can give you a lot of information about your specific area. Other management professionals, including Natural Resource Conservation Service and state agricultural agents, also can be good sources of information.

In case professional help is not readily available, we suggest you investigate your own deer herd and habitat. First, if you are doing a good job of management, you no doubt have been keeping records on your herd and the animals that have been harvested. Important records such as dressed body weights; antler quality by different age-classes; incidental sightings of bucks, does and fawns; and lactation rates (percentage of harvested does still producing milk) tell a great deal about what is happening nutritionally with a whitetail herd.

If, for example, you have been harvesting large numbers of does but have not witnessed a compensatory increase in fawn production and survival, site-limiting factors could be at work. For example, several recent studies have demonstrated a lack of compensatory response to herd reductions in parts of Florida, North Carolina and Georgia. In such areas, intensive herd reductions might have little or no effect on herd productivity, body size or age-specific antler quality. Another clue would be a high spiking rate, both for yearlings and older bucks, in spite of population-control measures.

What might cause such problems? Soil fertility is a common culprit. Another is a lack of high-protein species in the native plant community.

Fortunately, both issues can be addressed with a sound food-plot program.

When it comes to body condition, bucks and does might as well be of different species. When bucks are fat, does are thin, and vice versa. This results from basic biological differences between the sexes.

During the late spring and summer, bucks have it pretty easy. They move about in small bachelor groups and have only themselves to consider. Does, on the other hand, must gestate two fawns and then nurse them to weaning in late summer or early fall. As a consequence, does are pretty worn out by that time. Fall brings heavy stress to bucks, while does no longer have the stress of taking care of their fawns.

Although you cannot completely eliminate fat loss in bucks or does, you can help them make it through critical stress periods using food-source management and supplemental forages. Good nutrition will increase fawn survival, as well as the next year's antler growth.

The geographic location of your land greatly influences whether or not you have a nutritional problem and, if so, when it occurs. Throughout the whitetail's range, there are two major stress periods: summer and winter.

If you find that high-quality food is in short supply, you obviously need to increase it.

The severity of these periods, as well as their impact on herd health, depends on local weather conditions. In the South, for example, the greatest stress occurs in late summer to early fall, when vegetation tends to dry up and lose nutrients. There typically is only a minor stress period in the winter. Obviously, winter is the primary stress period in the North, with the hottest time of year generally still having good growing conditions. Regardless of the cause(s), a herd undergoes nutritional stress if the quality and quantity of forage diminish.

If you find that high-quality food is in short supply, you obviously need to increase it. There are two primary ways to do this: You can either manipulate the native forage to improve both quality and quantity or you can provide supplemental forage through food plots. In some cases, direct feeding also might be necessary.



If your property has a high incidence of spikes, it could be due to poor soil and a lack of high-protein species in the native plant community. Photo by Duncan Dobie.

Although we can think of no situation in which proper management of natural forage is unnecessary, the best way to produce large amounts of high-quality forage is through a sound food-plot program. Feeding pelleted rations often is cited as an alternative to food plots, but feeding is costly, ranging from $0.30 to $1.60 per deer per day. If you have 300 acres, and the population density is one deer per 10 acres, it could cost you as much as $48 per day — $12,940 per year — to feed the herd! In contrast, food-plot forages cost only about $0.01 per pound.

(Note: We do use pelleted rations in certain situations, such as in areas where food plots are not practical and/or as a backup to food plots during periods of drought.)

MANAGEMENT STYLES

There are two basic deer-management philosophies. First, there is extensive management, under which you attempt to manage the herd within the existing limitations of the habitat. This type of management involves providing for a population's needs on a broad geographic scale.

Coupled with restrictive deer harvest, extensive management basically worked well for rebuilding the whitetail population during an era in which there were far fewer people and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of land. However, years of shooting too few does allowed the herd to become too large and unbalanced, leaving many wildlife managers eager to try a different approach. With an ever-increasing human population, a shrinking land base with a large proportion under private ownership, increasing fragmentation of the landscape, and declining herd quality, some managers began to opt for intensive management.

In contrast to extensive management, this approach addresses the needs of the population on each parcel of land in an effort to maximize its productivity. In an intensive management program, both the herd and habitat are manipulated for greater productivity.

Supplementing native forage with the right food plots can enhance fawn production, boost body size and raise antler quality above and beyond typical extensive management programs. For example, at Fort Perry Plantation near Columbus, Georgia, we were able to grow extremely large-bodied deer (live weights of 250 pounds or more), high fawn crops (130 percent or even higher), and extremely high-quality antlers. All of this was directly attributable to our intensive year-round food-plot program.

The Columbus area typically gets enough rainfall to grow a lot of native forage, but native habitat there lacks enough high-protein plants to produce high numbers of deer that have reached their genetic potential for body and antler size. Proper use of food plots made all the difference for us at Fort Perry — and it can for you, too.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

As this issue goes to press, ***North American Whitetail*** is preparing to release the authors' new book on food-source management. It will include great advice on growing better food plots, as well as a region-by-region look at native deer forages. The book will be available on NorthAmericanWhitetail.com in the near future.

Our September issue will feature a look at where to locate food plots on your property for the most benefit.