BUILDING YOUR OWN 'DEER FACTORY'

Getting Started In Deer Management

You say you're ready to begin a management program on your land, but you aren't sure how to go about it? Read this, and you'll know!

by David Morris

So, you want to start a management program on your property. You certainly like the idea of having more and bigger bucks. But you're not quite sure exactly where to begin or even which questions to ask.

Well, you're not alone. Practically everyone feels that way starting out. But the answers are out there, and we at ***WHITETAIL*** are committed to helping you find them.

After all, when we decided to start our own management program at Fort Perry Plantation, the magazine's deer-research facility in Georgia, we were in just the same position you're in now. Finally, after struggling for answers on how to proceed, we came up with a step-by-step process for what amounts to building a "deer factory" on your land!

STEPS IN THE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The concept will work for anyone. It starts with the need to (1) *establish management objectives* to guide you through the process. This, in turn, both requires and goes hand in hand with (2) *an evaluation of available resources and the desires of the persons involved.*

From there, the need to (3) *make preliminary plans to accomplish your strategy* becomes obvious. However, that can't happen until you (4) *acquire reasonably accurate information about the key parameter of your deer herd*, which requires some type of (5) *censusing.*

The next step is to use your census results to (6) *work up a population model*, which is nothing more than a set of numbers reflecting how many male and female deer of various ages are on your land now and will be in the future. With this, you can make surprisingly accurate predictions about the impact of any management decision before you actually put it into practice.

Once you have your population model, you can (7) *make specific goals and come up with strategies for meeting them.* At this point, you'll be able to (8) *put together the end product of management: a harvest plan* that tells you which deer need to be removed from the herd in order to accomplish your specific goals.

This all might sound intimidating, but it really isn't. As you progress, the unknowns and gray areas will slowly fade away. Assumptions you've made about your herd and land gradually will be strengthened by testing and the discovery of more facts. And in time, you'll see the returns: a healthier herd, more and bigger bucks, greater enjoyment of hunting and the satisfaction of knowing you've made a difference!

As the chart on Page 42 shows, there are three basic categories of factors affecting deer management: the *herd*; the *habitat*; and the *people* involved. Every variable with which you need to be concerned fits into one of these groupings.

As we get farther along in our coverage of managing deer on private lands, we'll discuss all of the factors listed in this chart, showing how they'll impact your efforts to develop and maintain a healthy herd. (Indeed, on Page 52 of this issue, Dr. James C. Kroll will begin providing his advice on how to analyze and improve habitat.) Here, though, we're going to focus on the critical first steps in the management process: evaluating resources and the desires of the people involved.

REALISTIC OBJECTIVES

One of the biggest frustrations in game management stems from setting unrealistic objectives and goals. This, in turn, usually stems from a failure to properly evaluate what you want to accomplish and what you have available to you for making it happen.

Management objectives are highly subjective. Basically, just about any objective of the people involved is the *right* objective — provided it's achievable. If not, frustration and failure are sure to follow.

What's achievable largely depends on your resources, particularly land and money. The more and bigger bucks you want, the greater the demands on your resources. A good management strategy combines the wishes of the people with a realistic evaluation of the potential, given the available resources.

Of course, there are two ways to go about this. First, you could determine your objectives and then go after the resources (for example, a certain amount of land) needed to accomplish them. Much more common, though, is for your existing resources to shape your objectives.

Fortunately, even with modest

Producing more and bigger bucks on your property begins with taking a look at your management objectives and determining the resources you have. No two situations are exactly alike, but the fundamentals of the process are the same everywhere. Photo by Mike Biggs.

land and financial resources, rather lofty expectations still can be reached. But they must be realistic.

Again, there's no rule that says we all must have the same management objectives for our land. Still, having said that, there might well be a common baseline yardstick by which we can measure management objectives and strategies: a "natural" herd. (For an explanation of just what this is and why it's important, refer to editor Gordon Whittington's feature on Page 42.)

EVALUATING RESOURCES

Determining the management potential of your situation is a fairly objective process, because that potential is determined by physical factors. Some of these are under your control, and some aren't.

The Habitat

Chief among your resources is the deer habitat you want to manage. For our purposes, we can define habitat as "the environmental setting in which an animal normally lives." Providing deer with a good place to live is one of the obvious keys to producing a healthy herd, and analyzing your habitat is the subject of Dr. Kroll's feature that begins on Page 52 of this issue.

All else being equal, the size of your property will determine the scope of your program and the number of bucks you can harvest without threatening herd health. Also, the more limited your acreage, the greater the impact — positive or negative — neighbors can have on your program.

In general, the larger the "protected zone," the greater control you have over the herd.

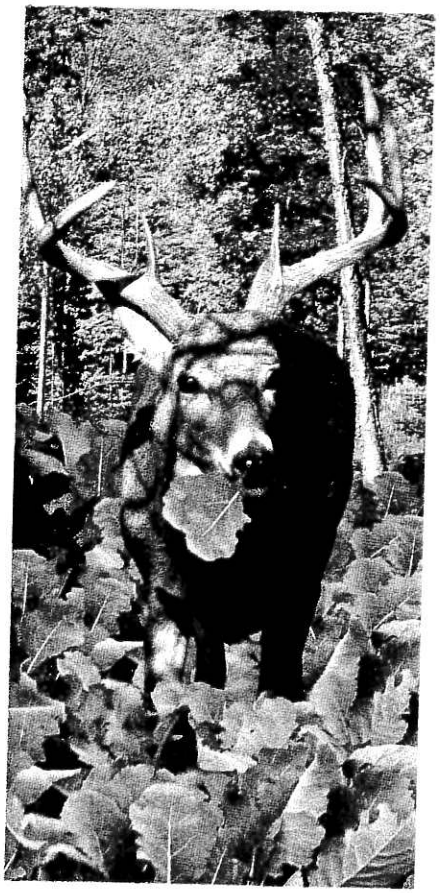
If they share your philosophy of managing for a healthy herd, you'll all have better hunting collectively than any of you could have individually. If, on the other hand, they *don't* share your views on management, your program is unlikely to yield as great a return. This makes fostering a spirit of cooperation a priority for most private-land managers, especially those with limited acreage.

In general, the larger the "protected zone," the greater control you have over the herd. And remember, we're talking about the managed area, not just how much land *you* actually have under direct control. With good neighbors, your program can be highly successful even if you control only part of the managed area.

For example, my 80-acre "ranch" in Montana sits in the middle of a lightly hunted national forest, and my two 15-acre clover meadows are the hub of local deer activity. And I know of a case in which a 10-acre tract lies next to a large unhunted utility holding. You should see the huge bucks that have been shot on that tiny tract over the years!

When you have the best (or only) food sources around, deer are going to be easier to hold tightly on your land. Conversely, when neighboring lands also offer well-set tables, deer will be "all over the map."

Some might take exception to the idea of using food sources to extend a management program onto neighboring lands. Well, you and your neighbors share deer anyway, like it or not. In the case of good neighbors, this works to your advantage — in the case of bad, to your



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detriment. Either way, if you improve the nutrition on your property, the deer you share are going to be healthier.

Of course, one of the beauties of food-source management is that you get to decide on the placement of food sources, thus exercising some control over the managed area (and the deer) and the extent to which you influence neighboring properties. (Dr. Kroll will discuss this concept in great detail in future issues.)

Interestingly, heavy hunting pressure on neighboring lands actually can work to your advantage, in an odd sort of way. When high pressure is exerted next to a place with much lower pressure, the pressure actually can become a barrier to deer traffic, almost as real and effective as a physical barrier.

Nearly all of us have seen this happen around the edges of state parks or other unhunted refuges. You sometimes can watch deer do their thing in perfect contentment just across the line. They know where the boundaries are, and they even seem to know when hunting season opens! The same principle holds true on well-managed private lands next door to heavily hunted properties, though the effect usually isn't quite as pronounced.

The nature of the habitat also determines a tract's potential to produce deer. Certainly, the types and amount of cover, the availability of water, and the quality and amount of forage are all considerations. And because agriculture is a plus for a management program, whether or not the land is conducive to efficient farming is a concern. This is largely a function of soil types and climate.

The Existing Herd

While you're still in the strategy-forming stage, it's a bit early to expect to know the precise condition of your deer herd. We'll start getting into that next month. In the beginning, a preliminary assessment will give you a fair idea about the general nature of the herd you're starting with.

One of the first things you need to know is information about the land's recent deer-harvest history — that is, how much pressure has been exerted on the herd. On limited acreage, you also need to assess your neighbors' hunting pressure to get the complete picture; after all, they're to some degree "fishing out of the same pond" you are. This is just one more benefit of getting to know your neighbors and working with them.

This recent harvest history will tell you much about the number and age of bucks likely to be around. The higher the pressure, of course, the poorer the buck age structure, the less-balanced the buck:doe ratio and the lower the expected size of bucks.

While recent harvest history will speak to the size of bucks now present, it might not say much about size *potential*, if overcrowding or overharvest of bucks has been a chronic problem. If that's the case, look beyond your borders to see what better-managed places in the area are producing, or look back in time to the "good old days" to find out what size bucks you might be able to grow.

In your preliminary assessment of the herd, you need to get a handle on roughly how many deer the tract is now supporting and what the habitat's productive capacity is. Coming up with a firm deer count obviously will be difficult, if not impossible, but a few drive-throughs and a little legwork should give you



an idea as to whether or not the property is overcrowded with deer. Also, there's now the option of censusing deer by using infrared-triggered cameras or counters, as Dr. Kroll discussed in the August, September and October '97 issues.

Check damage to primary browse species. (If you don't know what those are for your area, find out from whatever sources you have available to you, including agency biologists.) Severe damage to the choicest plants means there are too many deer for the available food supply. Also, if deer are highly visible at food sources for a good part of the day, you should suspect overcrowding.

Again, the tract's recent harvest history will help tell the story about herd density. Assuming you can at least approximate the age of bucks taken, their size will offer good clues as to where the herd stands relative to the habitat's productive capacity. A baseline population density for the general area often can be obtained from your wildlife agency, but accept it only as a relative number.

The goal here is to gain a general understanding of the beginning status of your herd. However, don't



Part of assessing your resources is determining how many deer you have on your property. If major damage is being done to prime forage plants, you might well be above the productive capacity of the habitat. Fortunately, in most cases, that capacity can be raised. Photo by Bill Lerner.



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let harvest history or the generally accepted limitations of your area necessarily set the upper limit on what you can do. An intensive food-source management program, in conjunction with sound herd management, can push the envelope to a whole new level!

Financial Resources

Even when land bases are comparable, not everyone has the same resources. A food-source program can be rather expensive, especially during startup. While direct feeding seldom takes as much front-end money as food plots, it's normally more expensive over the long haul.

Just gearing up for agriculture can tax the bank account. If fields don't already exist, they'll have to be carved out. If you don't already have farm equipment and can't pay a local farmer to do your agricultural work (the cheapest option), an equipment purchase might be in the offing, as might hiring someone to run the equipment.

Then there's the land preparation, seed planting, etc. Censusing, setting up stands, building roads, managing native habitat — it all can add up. Still, when you consider what you already have invested in the land, it would be a shame to try to save a dime and end up losing the whole enchilada.

Look for ways to minimize the need for money to carry out your program. Time, labor, equipment on hand and even knowledge are all important resources. Evaluate your situation with an eye toward being as efficient as possible and taking advantage of what's available.

Hunting Regulations

Your wildlife agency can play a big role in the success of your management program. For instance, low bag limits and short gun seasons make management tougher, especially when you're trying to harvest surplus does. You might have to bring in so many hunters and apply such intense pressure to control doe numbers that one of your main goals — to grow and harvest big bucks — is lost in the process.

Fortunately, the general public now is making more demands than ever on wildlife agencies to keep deer numbers in check. With recent increases in whitetail populations, many areas now have reached what's referred to as the "cultural carrying capacity." This is the upper limit of deer density that's acceptable to the general public, who are worried about deer-auto collisions and deer damage to crops, residential plantings and the overall habitat.

As a result of these concerns, in many places hunting regulations have begun to reflect the public's demands for a smaller deer herd, resulting in some loosening of harvest restrictions. This trend seems likely to continue, and it could help deer managers in many areas.

CONCLUSION

Once you have a grip on what you want to accomplish and know your land and resources are up to the job, it's time to head afield and start gathering herd data. These later will be used in putting together a population model and making final decisions about your harvest plan.

Of course, before you can do that, you must know just what data are needed. That will be the topic of discussion in our next feature in this series, in the August issue. Then, in September, we'll look at the best ways to acquire that information.

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