BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

The 'Natural' Way To A Healthy Herd

*Nature's plan is for our deer populations to be well-balanced and healthy — and **WHITETAIL**'s going to tell you exactly how to make that happen on the land you hunt!*

by Gordon Whittington

Imagine going afield on opening day knowing there are plenty of bucks on the land you hunt. Now, imagine a fair percentage of them are mature. And finally, imagine all of the deer in the area — bucks, does and fawns alike — are so well-fed they're reaching their full potential.

What you've just imagined isn't some Utopian fantasy, but a flash-back to the way things really used to be. And believe it or not, it's the way things can be again. All it will take is some knowledge and commitment on the part of those who love deer and the environment.

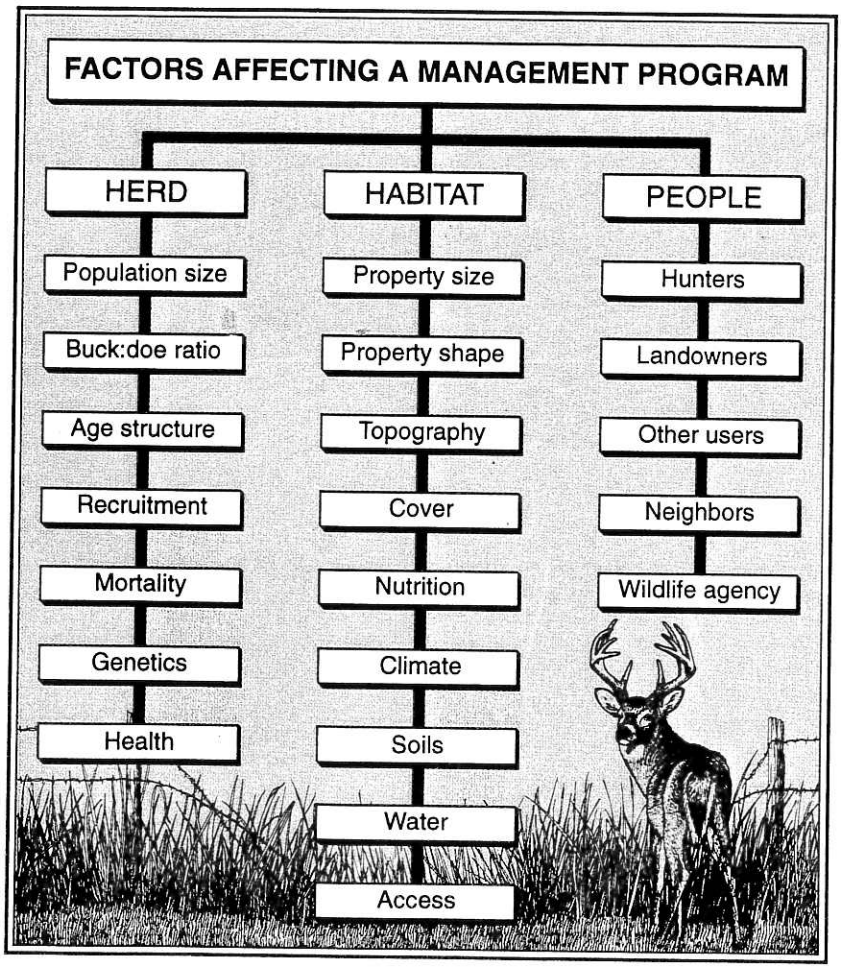
Last October, ***WHITETAIL*** began special coverage aimed at improving your deer herd and, along with it, the overall quality of your hunting experience. Many of you later contacted us to verify your interest in managing land and to tell us of your efforts in that area.

Well, good news: We're not only continuing our coverage of whitetail management, but we're also *expanding* it, providing detailed step-by-step instructions for improving the herd on your land!

How can we be sure it will work? There are two big reasons. First, in a broad sense, we know a balanced herd is possible everywhere, because that's what was here before modern man began to interfere with the ecosystem.

Second, through years of work at ***WHITETAIL***'s research facility, Fort Perry Plantation, we've proved that the right nutritional strategy and population management can make an amazing difference in the size and health of individual deer. If your herd is balanced in terms of overall numbers, sex ratio and age structure and you add great nutrition to the mix, you'll have healthy whitetails on your land. It's that simple.

Such a population will provide you with wonderful hunting, including the opportunity to harvest mature bucks more consistently than ever. But there's an even better reason to advocate this management strategy: It's simply the right thing to do, not



*This list shows factors that come into play when managing deer. We'll be discussing them all in **WHITETAIL**. Graphic by Allen Hansen.*



In a "natural" herd, deer numbers are held within the productive capacity of the habitat, and there are good numbers of older bucks in the population. A happy byproduct of this is great hunting, as Adan Alverez proved on Texas' King Ranch last season. Adan's awesome non-typical is the biggest buck taken in the state since 1966! Photo courtesy of Adan Alvarez.

only for the deer, but for their habitat as well. Let's examine this concept of a "natural" herd, to see why it's so critical to the future of both whitetail hunting and land stewardship across North America.

NATURE'S WAY

It's quite literally only natural to manage for a well-balanced, well-fed deer population. But many of you have been dealing with unbalanced, nutritionally stressed herds for so long that you find it hard to believe healthy ones once were the rule.

All evidence points to North America's aboriginal whitetail herd having contained a high percentage of mature deer. Many of the jawbones recovered from ancient hunters' campsites are of older deer. Thus we can assume that if hunters frequently harvested such animals, there must have been plenty of them around.

Today, among the few relatively pristine herds anywhere is the one on South Texas' huge King Ranch. Until the late 1980s, only a few family members and guests had hunted this 830,000-acre property, so the overall deer population there remained much as it was before the area was settled. That makes it an especially good place to study the characteristics of a "natural" herd.

When the King Ranch was opened to deer hunting a few years ago, ***WHITETAIL***'s David Morris and Dr. James C. Kroll were among the first biologists to visit. What they found was a tight buck:doe ratio, with plenty of those bucks being in the more mature age-classes. And thanks to the presence of numerous predators, including coyotes, bobcats and even the occasional cougar, deer numbers were in balance with the carrying capacity of the land.

(As the accompanying photo shows, these deer can be great trophies. A feature on this stunning King Ranch buck — Texas' top whitetail in 31 years! — will be published in an upcoming issue.)

In short, on the basis of both archeological evidence and what we see in our few remaining aboriginal herds, nature's goal is a deer population with a well-balanced sex ratio and large numbers of mature bucks. And there's every reason to believe that some mix of predators, winter kill and drought kept total deer numbers from exceeding the carrying capacity of the habitat.

MANAGEMENT'S ROLE

Can we create more "natural" deer herds by managing private lands? You bet! Most whitetails live on private property, so what happens there will, to a great extent, chart the future course of deer hunting and management. Fortunately, growing numbers of you are committing yourselves to herd improvement, and for that you're to be applauded.

WHITETAIL's proven strategy for managing deer can help you achieve those positive results and thus gain control over your hunting future. This strategy is built around what we've termed "food-source" management: providing deer with plenty of high-quality nutrition all year long.

Our successes at Fort Perry Plantation have convinced us that if you give whitetails the right types and amounts of food year 'round, they'll respond with increased body and antler size, plus higher survival and growth rates of fawns (a group that obviously includes the big bucks of the future).

And there's more. Food-source management can reduce browsing on the native habitat, helping plants not only survive earlier deer damage, but also actually recover from it. Fort Perry provides clear proof of this. The native forage there actually has increased, even though deer numbers have been building in recent years.

As a result, while there's now a high deer density at Fort Perry, the property isn't overpopulated — there's still more good, natural food than the herd can eat. With food-source management, you can grow more and bigger deer on your land and improve the habitat at the same time. Talk about a win-win deal!

Again, the greatest gains of all will be made if you combine food-source management with a well-balanced herd. And just as it's quite possible for you to improve deer nutrition on your land, it's just as conceivable to achieve that better buck:doe ratio and better buck age structure. As you'll soon learn, people just like you are doing it today, all across North America!

MANAGEMENT VARIABLES

Private-land deer management is really nothing more than identifying factors that affect deer on your property and then manipulating those variables to the herd's advantage. What are those factors? Turn to the chart on Page 42 to see.

As this chart shows, there are only three basic components of private-land management:

Herd variables are the physical features of your deer population. Understanding how they relate to each other is certainly a must if you hope to have more and bigger bucks on your property.

Habitat variables are the physical features of the land area that's occupied by deer. Among these are a number of key elements, including your property's acreage and the amount of cover. You need to know how to manipulate these variables in order to maximize the success of your management program.

Finally, we must identify and consider the *people* involved. These groups and/or individuals are "stakeholders" in the management process, and their desires, goals and resources ultimately determine what can — and can't — be done to manage the herd.

OK . . . NOW WHAT?

So, you know you want — and need — to improve the deer herd on your land. What's next?

You can't measure progress if you don't know your starting point or your destination. To manage deer, you need to make an accurate assessment of where you are now, figure out where you want to go and then determine the resources you have for making it happen.

One of these resources is knowledge, the kind we're about to give you. With this in mind, first turn to David Morris' feature on Page 46, in which he'll tell you what's involved in starting a management program. Then see Page 52, where Dr. James C. Kroll will share secrets of developing prime deer habitat.

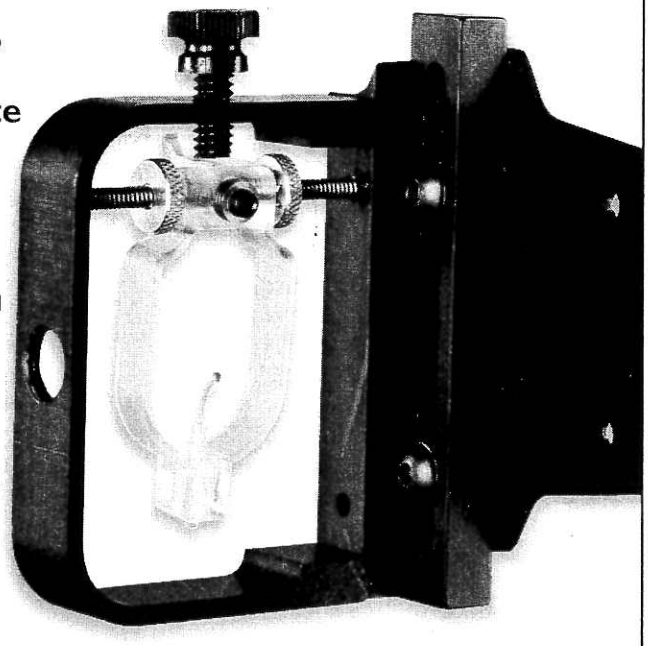
Read what ***WHITETAIL***'s experts have to say. Then get ready for the August issue, in which they'll offer even more great advice on managing your land for deer!

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