Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

The United States of Deer

Part 2

By Dr. James C. Kroll

A critical look at where deer management is going.

Last issue I began this two part series on where white-tailed deer management is heading around the country. This analysis is based on four decades of experience working with the species in almost every state and province from Mexico to Canada. The thoughts and opinions I express in this article do not represent what I want to happen; just what I think *will* happen. Last issue, we discussed the unique problems and trends for the eastern U.S. In this installment, we move westward.

Midwestern Farming Area

A number of years ago, a friend of mine, Dr. Larry Marchinton, conducted a study with some of his University of Georgia colleagues on why this region produces so many record book bucks. The answer really was quite simple. The area has great soil, abundant farming, and few states have a rifle season. This is a heavy bow hunting area, almost as common as the Lake States. If you do not bowhunt, you are relegated to the later shotgun and muzzleloader seasons.

The big Ohio, Iowa, and Illinois monsters you see adorning covers of deer specialty magazines come from the world's largest food plot. Soybeans, corn and other grains— when coupled with great soils—provide a consistently high nutritional base. Since the hunting weapons in play, by their nature protect mature bucks, a higher percentage of these animals are able to realize their true genetic potential.

Unfortunately, however, I'm seeing the first stages of over-population decline. The reputation of these states was built on a growing deer herd. Yes, the timing of seasons and weapons used reduce overharvest of bucks, but they also affect herd recruitment. As farmland gets abandoned and hunter numbers decline, I predict the decade we now hunt in will become the "good old days" for many midwestern hunters.

The future of the Midwest will hinge on the advent of management, because today there is little management in effect for this area. Times are too good and there are so many big bucks being killed, folks are not yet interested. But, the day will come in the next decade when some individuals will opt for management. If this happens, and if it happens in time, there is a mighty high bar set for this region.

The Lake States

This area presents a real challenge and really concerns me. The problems faced by Lake States managers are: the climate, years of over-population, decades of mismanagement, and wolves and bears. Harsh climates require a manager who



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. He also says Oklahoma will be next hotspot for trophy hunting over the next decade.

really knows his stuff. Whereas, in the Deep South, we can pretty much grow food plots year-round, most Lake States properties are limited to five months at best. That means innovative nutrition management strategies such as timber harvesting, native forage manipulation, and cultivated forage banking are a must. Years of traditional deer management, which focused on antlers rather than herd control have degraded habitats and herd genetics. A handful of landowners have managed to turn some herds around from a quality standpoint, but these are the exception rather than the rule.

Because most agency and university biologists do not hunt, there is little sympathy for producing more deer. In fact, the trend in the Lake States has been to encourage or release large, mega-predators to control deer populations. Minnesota and Wisconsin now have wolf populations so numerous, deer are disappearing from the woods. Add in black bears, which have been shown to have a significant impact on fawn survival, you have yourself a deer management problem.

There still remain some hotspots for trophy bucks, particularly in Wisconsin, where bowhunting is a tradition. This also is a state where QDM is very popular, and where food plots are common. Michigan, ever so slowly is coming around to better deer management, and recently moved to antler restrictions. However, I do not expect Michigan to become a "management Mecca" in the coming years.

If there ever were a place for hunting to be banned, I believe it could be in Montana or Colorado. Urbanians are moving in high numbers to these states, and they are bringing their city ways and culture. We already are seeing out-of-state migrants make significant political changes to what once was a conservative landscape.

The Grasslands

No geographic area has more potential for sustainable trophy production than the prairie or grassland states. The reasons are simple. First, the area represents a very harsh climate—very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Consequently, deer populations do not reach saturation very often. When they do, weather tends to take care of things.

Next, the average age of landowners (and resident hunters) are getting old quickly. Hunting tradition is more western, in that it involves either taking off across the land or driving around in a truck. Neither technique works well for whitetails, which require "ambush" hunting. Hence, as with the Midwest hunting style improves chances of older bucks. To the northwest, epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) and bluetongue, which both are viral agents, kills off almost half the herd every five to seven years. And last, climates in the northern portions of the region during hunting season discourage non-resident hunters.

The "shining star" among this region is Oklahoma. It has been the best kept secret to this time, but I fully anticipate this state to emerge over the next decade as a trophy hunting hotspot. There also is a growing interest in management. In fact, Congressman Dan Boren was able to get an education program set up at Oklahoma, specifically to train deer managers. This is the most innovative program to date. Finally, Oklahoma is about the most "management friendly" state I work in. So, I predict there will be good management in Oklahoma, but the remaining prairie states will rely on nature for management.

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landscape. I hope this is one prediction that never comes true, but we have to be vigilant.

The Northwest

Whitetails never have been overly abundant in this region. Mule deer and black-tailed deer are the real deer for that region. However, there are surprisingly fine whitetails in the thin drainages and woodlands. Recently, the Columbian whitetail has increased in numbers to huntable proportions. Frankly, however, I do not see management ever becoming common in this region. It has a western hunting tradition of public hunting, and land use does not lend itself to much management.

Texas

I saved the Lone Star State for last, and for good reason. As I travel around the country, I often hear the critical comment, "Well, this ain't Texas!" I really want to say, "Yes, but it ought to be!" Yet, I bite my lip and go on. The truth is, Texas was the birthplace of management and truly is different in every way. That is why I included it as a single state. The value Texas has is a proving ground for various management strategies and techniques, which then can be applied in some way to other regions. Not everything developed in Texas, however, can be used in other regions. High fences, for example, are banned by law and very unpopular in many states. On the other hand, improving age and sex structure is something common in Texas, which should be part of every management program throughout the range.

Now, just because Texas is the birthplace of management does not mean we are perfect in every way. Those of us here in eastern Texas, and I might add western residents too, often feel like "step children." Agency biologists habitually refer to *ranches*, rather than properties. For much of the northeastern portion of the state, land holdings are very small, mimicking characteristics of some of the other regions. I worked for almost a decade getting Texas Parks and Wildlife to consider antler restrictions. Once implemented, these regulations become very popular and commonly accepted.

I'm convinced Texas will remain an intensive management stronghold. What we have seen over the last three decades is a steady evolution toward private deer management. In the next two decades, I predict there will be landowners who are giving the flexibility to manage deer herds in a manner similar to game ranching in South Africa. If not given private ownership of deer on fenced ranches, landowners will be given *de facto* ownership. Deer will replace cattle, sheep, and goats as the ruminant of choice on range and brushlands. A landowner will be able to make money from hunting, breeding, selling, recreational viewing and venison production.

What about the small landowner? We hear a lot about cooperatives being the solution. Yes, cooperatives work in areas where the landowner resides on the property, but fail miserably where there are large numbers of absentee landowners. Hence, continued use of antler restrictions will be the only way to maintain a more natural age and sex structure. I also see the day when doe tags are pretty much a thing of the past. In fact, I predict tagging in general will eventually disappear. Economics and practicality will take care of that.

Texas is not immune from urban wildlife problems. We too often falsely consider Texas as a *rural state*. We are mostly urban, and the rural lifestyle is no more immune from loss than in the east. I predict deer management in the future also will include programs and strategies to control urban deer populations; sometimes using sharp shooters or even controlled bowhunts to do so.

So, where is Texas heading? I predict the southern portion of the state will remain a bastion of deer management for at least two decades. Central Texas will be a patchwork quilt of high-fenced, small properties and a few cooperatives. Eastern Texas will continue to fragment and become more and more like the Midwest and East. A scattering of hunting clubs will remain, mimicking the Deep South. North Texas really *is* Oklahoma south of the Red River. Large landholdings, at least for the near future, will permit Grassland style hunting, with Texas-style management. Texas is and will remain for some time unique among the "deer states."

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What about Mexico?

I purposely did not list Mexico, first because it's not part of the U.S.; and second, because I really do not know what is going to happen in this troubled country. Clearly, there are seeds planted in Mexico that, if allowed to grow, will produce one of the best whitetail trophy hunting areas in the world. It's in the hands of Mexico's landowners and government. At this time, it's a deer management friendly country. Time only will tell.

Well, that is a run through on my thoughts about the future of deer management. Do not think I favor some of these predictions. I have spent four decades of my life trying to better the lives of whitetails and of whitetail hunting. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I have been in the deer woods for a very long time now.