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BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

A Year-Round Guide To Deer Management

To get the most from a management program on your hunting land, it helps to make out a schedule of what to do when. This seasonal calendar could maximize your benefits and minimize your setbacks.

by Gordon Whittington

For many hunters, the most dreadful time of year is here. Last deer season is either just a memory or will be in a few days, and the 2001 opener seems a lifetime off. If you're among these folks, you'd give anything for some way to shorten the wait.

But to private-land deer managers, such boredom is a foreign concept. For them, the problem is getting everything done during the off-season. There are food plots to grow, trespassers to outsmart, harvest records to analyze, deer to count – a "to do" list that can be downright intimidating unless a logical schedule is laid out on the front end.

While most of us can't build our daily lives around managing deer, the good news is that we don't have to. By taking a realistic look at our time, money and other resources, we can come up with a calendar of what needs to be done throughout the year to give us better hunting – without leaving us too tired to hunt.



Some habitat practices, such as prescribed burning (right), actually can set back your management program if used at the wrong time of year. With some other practices, such as using unmanned cameras for herd censusing (left), picking the best time to use them simply brings more accurate results and more helpful information. Staff photos.

No two management situations are identical, but the basics of sound management are the same in every case. So, even if not everything in the following calendar applies to your tract, the principles do. You can adapt them to any scenario, whether you're a landowner, an individual hunter or a member of a hunting club.

WINTER

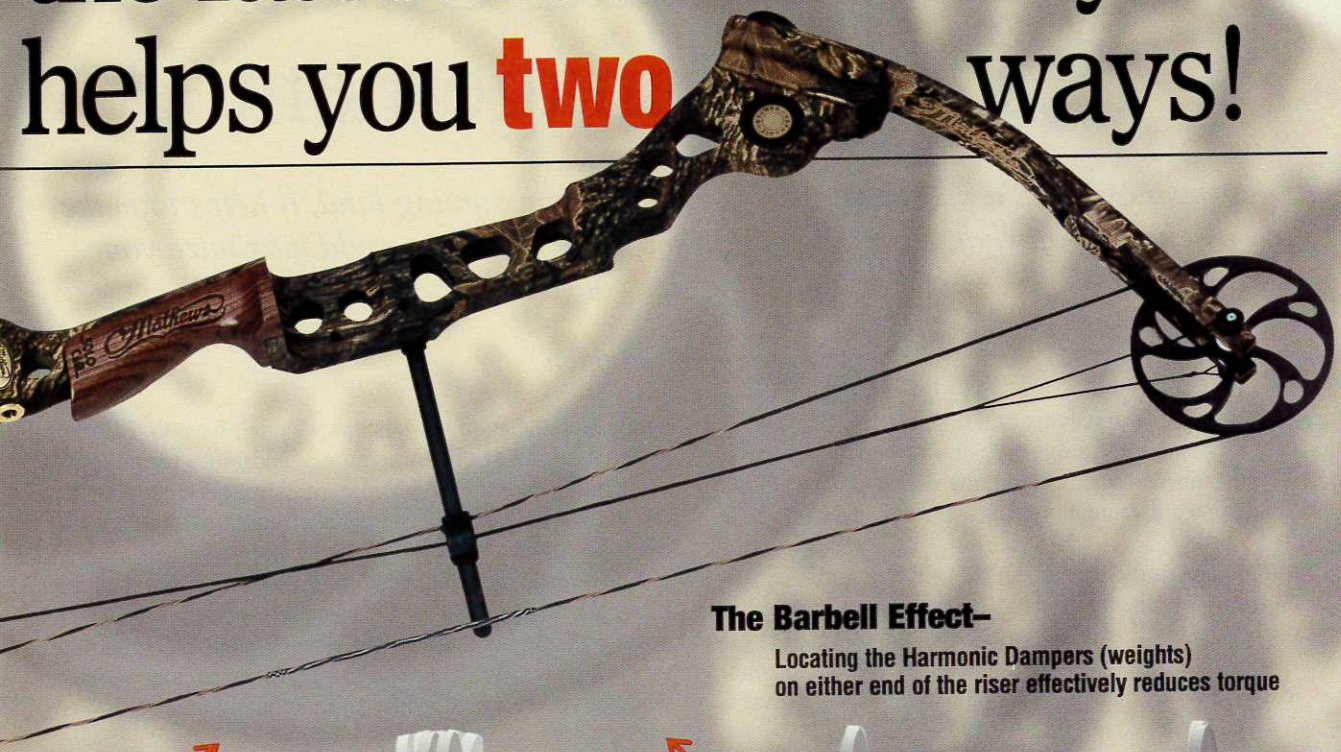
While last season is still fresh on your mind, assess the herd you just hunted. How many deer were seen? What was the age structure? What was the buck:doe ratio? How many deer were shot – and how did the kill break down by age and sex? What were body weights and antler measurements? How many does were lactating (in milk) when shot? How many were pregnant?

If the land was in a management program going into last fall, you should be able to answer these questions, provided you kept good harvest and observation records. Get those results tallied up now. If you *didn't* keep such records, try to round up whatever herd information you can get your hands on – and make plans to collect the right data *this* year.

Without good records, you can't quantify management progress; you don't know where you started from or where you are now. All you have are perceptions that the herd is improving, getting worse or staying the same, and perceptions are notoriously unreliable.

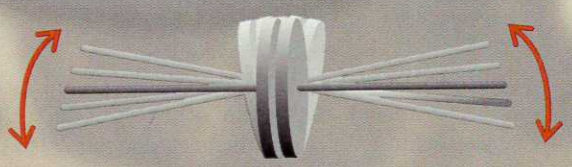
You should be able to study harvest and observation records and then paint a reasonably accurate picture of your herd. It's not hard. If you see a lot of deer but few are bucks,

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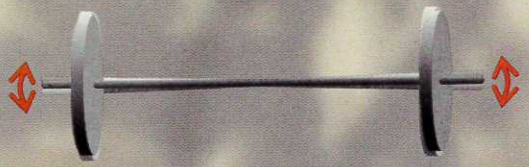


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With weight to the inside, the bar is easy to move



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2. Reduces torque

Weights added to either end of the riser increase the bow's moment of inertia. Call it the "barbell effect." Think of a barbell with the weights at the center of the bar. Holding the barbell near the middle, you can readily "whip" the ends of the bar side-to-side. With the weights at the end, it would be much more difficult to "whip" the bar. The same is true of the bow's riser. With weight (especially the brass dampers) added on either end, it becomes much more difficult to manipulate or torque the riser. Which means you'll shoot more accurately because the bow is more forgiving.

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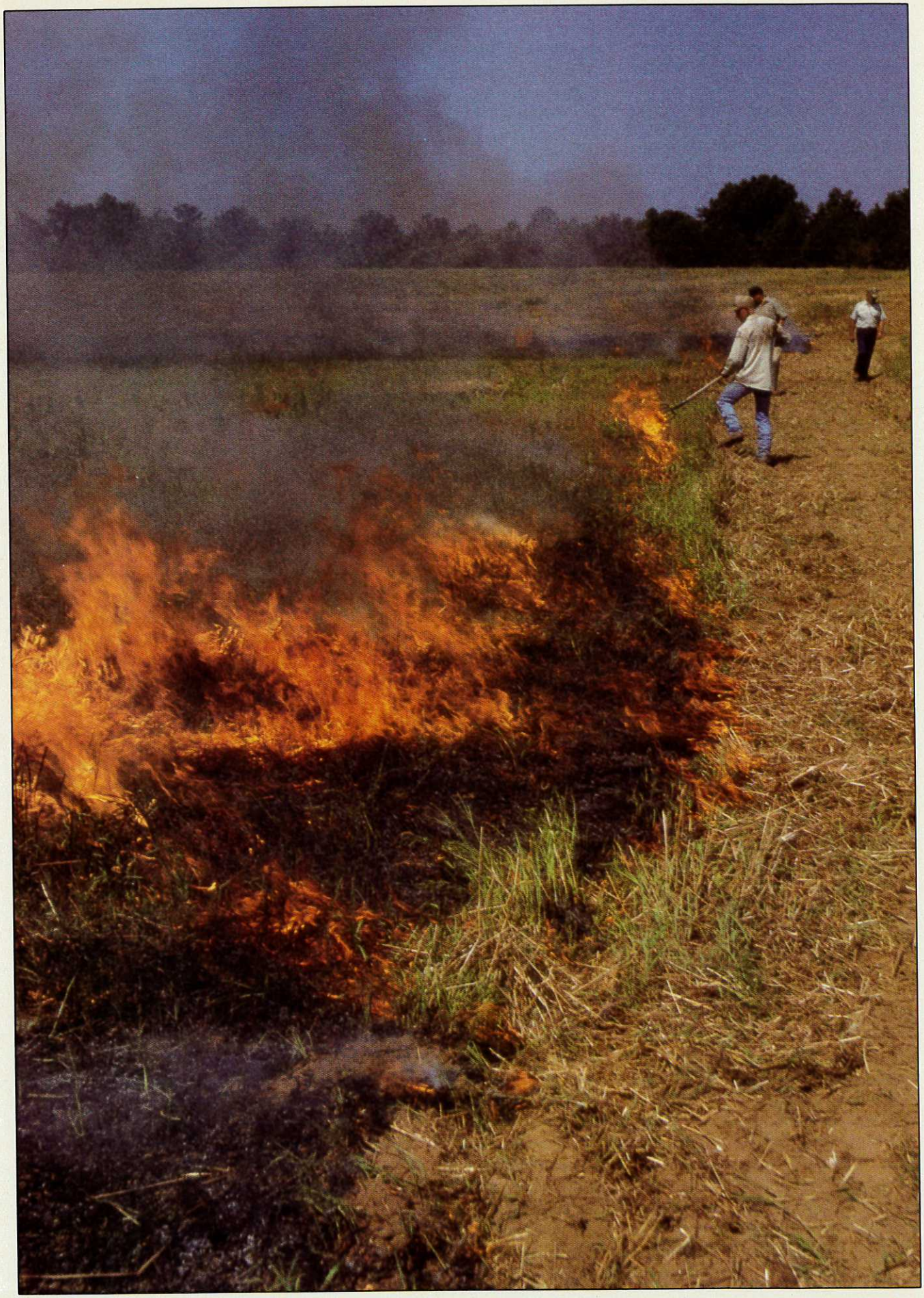
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chances are you have a sex-ratio problem, one caused by killing too many bucks and/or too few does. And if nobody ever sees a mature buck or finds sign of one, age structure is likely a problem, resulting from too high a buck kill. (Keep in mind that possible problems in your herd aren't always a sole result of your management. Improper harvest often can be traced in part to neighboring tracts.)

To revamp your harvest strategy, start now – not next fall. Try to convince everyone who hunts the land that something must change in order to produce a healthier herd. If they refuse to agree with your assessment, you need to know that as soon as possible. In a worst-case scenario, you might conclude that you have no choice but to recruit new hunters or find yourself other land to manage.

Right after deer season also is a great time to bring up the idea of cooperative management with neighbors. If you're dissatisfied with your herd, at least one of your neighbors probably is dissatisfied with his. While the memory of a poor season lingers, you might get them to listen to the idea of managing two or more adjoining tracts as one.

If all deer on your property are small for their age, nutrition is a problem. Should that appear to be the case, don't wait until spring to come up with a solution. Start now, by determining the potential there might be for putting in food plots and/or providing supplemental feed.

As noted last month, direct feeding can get stressed deer through winter in better shape, so they don't have to catch up when spring arrives. But whether or not you provide feed, keep in mind that a year-round food-plot program – the cornerstone of deer management at ***WHITETAIL's*** research facility, Fort Perry Plantation – is in most cases the real key to a healthier herd.

Do you already have food plots? Are they working as well as you'd like? Do you have enough acreage planted? Is good forage out there year 'round? Should you experiment with new forage plants in 2001? Now's the time to answer these key questions.

If you lack experience in growing food plots, study up on practical farming techniques and the pluses and minuses of various forage varieties. Ask questions of local agricultural experts, as they can help you avoid costly mistakes. Get soil tests done early. And if you decide you need to purchase equipment for putting in food plots this spring, don't wait until planting time to try to do so.



When checking browse plants for evidence of deer use, it's especially important to do so at the right time. Otherwise, seasonal variations in feeding activities can greatly alter your survey results. Photo by Michael Skinner.

A browse survey – a careful check of how much native vegetation is being eaten by deer – can be a valuable management project. Late winter is the best time to conduct such a survey, because once browse plants begin actively growing again, you can't accurately determine how much they were eaten the previous year.

Also, late winter can be the time for putting in trees, shrubs and other permanent wildlife plantings. Check with a local nurseryman for the best planting conditions and methods.

In many areas, late winter also is the best time of year for prescribed (controlled) burning of habitat. This removes dead leaves, grass and other material that chokes out new growth, and it releases nutrients back into the soil. However, specific environmental conditions and all local restrictions on burning must be taken into account before the match is struck.

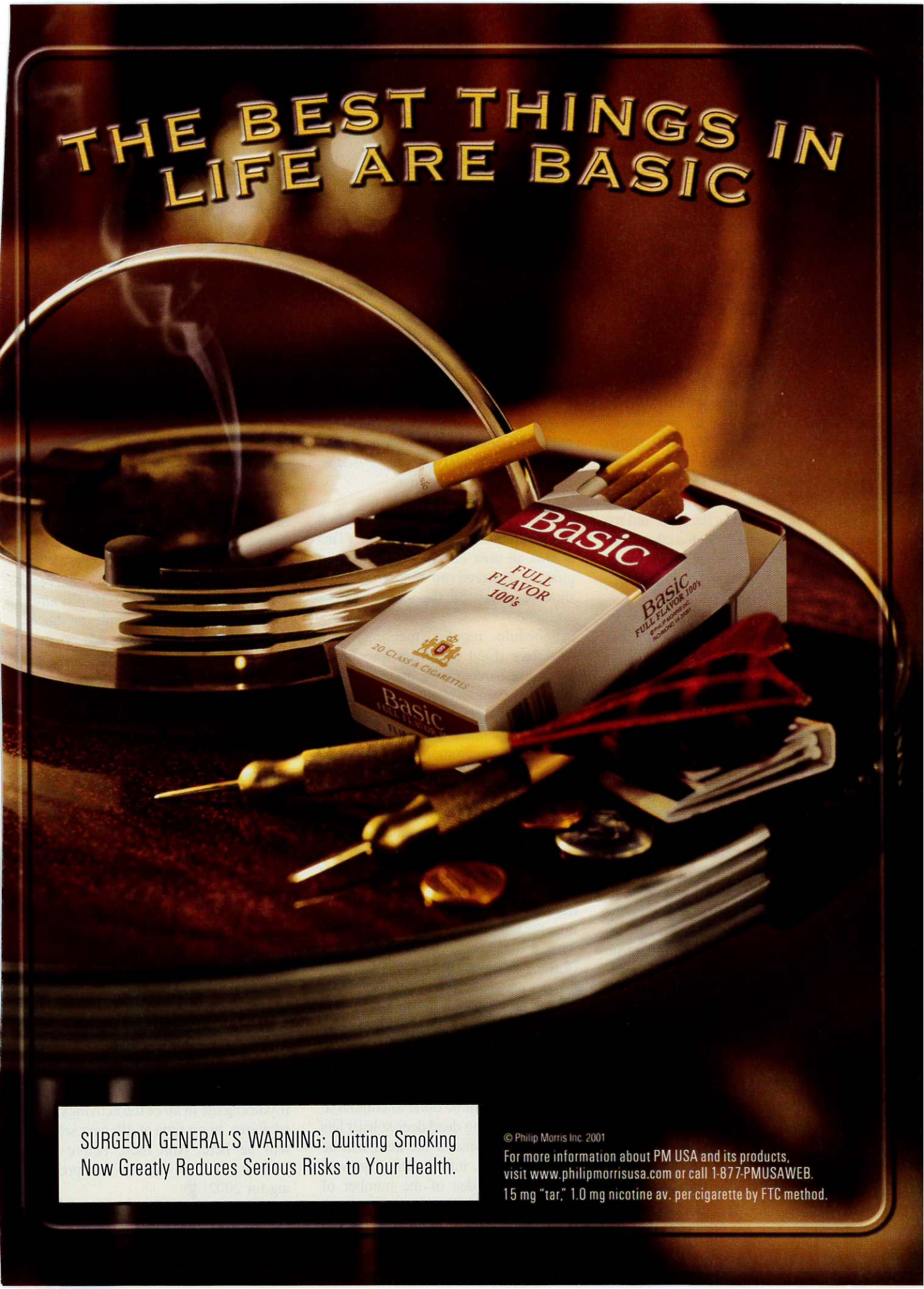
Predators are a natural part of every ecosystem, and they seldom have a major impact on deer herds. But if you've seen unacceptably high losses to predators – especially coyotes – winter is a great time to thin their ranks through hunting or trapping. In late winter these efforts will have the most effect, as this is the time when predator numbers are at a low point for the year. Just be sure to follow all legal regulations on control measures.

SPRING

Whenever the growing season starts in your area, be ready. Well before planting time arrives your plans for warm-season plots should be firm, and you should have all materials and equipment lined up.

Time your plantings with care, for guessing can be costly in more ways than one. Several years ago, a reader in Kansas called to tell us his warm-season food plots had been a disaster. He'd planted 200 acres of iron-and-clay cowpeas for his deer – but not being a farmer, and not having asked anyone's advice, he'd planted at least three weeks too early. Only a few of the seeds even sprouted; the rest rotted in cold, wet soil, wasting a fortune in materials and labor.

No matter how much money you have, it's silly to throw it away. But it's even worse to miss a year of progress in your program, because lost time is the one thing no one can buy back. Listen to local farmers, who know when and



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how to plant – as well as when and how *not* to.

If you're using supplemental feed and/or minerals, make sure you keep them out there, even after green-up. Keep track of how much is consumed at various times of year, so you can get a handle on seasonal use.

Spring is when most wildlife agencies conduct public hearings on proposed changes in hunting seasons, regulations, etc. In some cases, these could impact your ability to manage deer land. Attend these hearings and thoughtfully voice your opinions – positive or negative – on proposals that might affect your program.

Also, walk the edges of the property to look for evidence of trespassers, such as torn-down "Posted" signs, strange vehicle or human tracks, unrecognized stand or tree-step marks on trees, litter, etc. Note any places where poachers might access the land, and try to find ways to make that access more difficult. You don't want to spend all fall pursuing outlaws instead of deer.

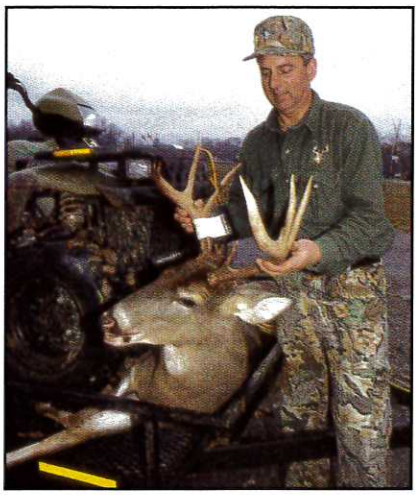
SUMMER

This is a busy time for a manager. In addition to checking the growth and utilization of food plots and taking steps to control weeds and insects in them, you should start making detailed herd observations.

It's best to keep year-round records of deer sightings. However, in spring it can be hard to tell antlerless bucks from big does, and year-old fawns of either sex can look a lot like young does. By midsummer you can more easily tell what you're looking at, as velvet-racked bucks are in bachelor groups and does have new fawns.

As you watch deer, write down how many you see and what they are (sex and estimated age). If you can identify individual animals, make note of them. It's a good idea to sketch the racks of any bucks to give you a record of where they were seen at various times.

By now, you should have firmed up who will be hunting the land during the coming season, and you all should be on the same page philosophically. If some hunters still don't share your management views, take them into the field with you. Seeing mature bucks in a bachelor group in the summer might



Harvesting a trophy buck is an exciting occasion. But don't forget to record vital information about the animal's size, age and condition. Such data can help you spot herd trends. Photo by Michael Skinner.

convince a skeptic not to shoot the first immature buck he sees next fall. (This is also an area in which photos from infrared-triggered cameras can help, by showing everyone the size of bucks available.)

Schedule regular meetings and workdays (food and drink provided). You want to create an atmosphere in which everyone feels they have a stake in – and an impact on – the program's success. The more you all get together and talk about common goals, the more likely you are to get agreement and compliance.

Remember that cool-season food plots are a big part of a nutrition program whether you hunt over them or not. If you're going to plant for deer next fall, plan ahead to have your materials and equipment ready. The best time for fall plantings can be as early as August in the North or as late as October in the South. Again, ask local experts when and how to plant.

In some areas, late summer into early fall is when hemorrhagic disease most often strikes. If you find dead deer near ponds or streams, HD could be the culprit. Because HD is a virus spread by midges, little can be done to combat it. However, finding dead deer at least lets you know the size of the herd will be reduced going into hunting season. Having some idea of the number of deer lost to disease could have an impact on the number you should take in the weeks ahead.

FALL

Don't get distracted by hunting just yet – there's still work to do. At the top of the list is censusing the herd.

In addition to coming up with an estimated total deer count, you also need to know the herd's composition: how many are antlered bucks versus does or fawns? And as best possible, you need to know their ages. Only by making good pre-season estimates can you confidently set proper harvest goals. Otherwise, you'll be guessing at how many of which deer to take, and that's no way to manage.

Simple observation is still a valid way to census deer. But managers now use everything from spotlight counts (where legal) to unmanned cameras to helicopters. Whichever methods you select, late summer into early fall is the time to use them.

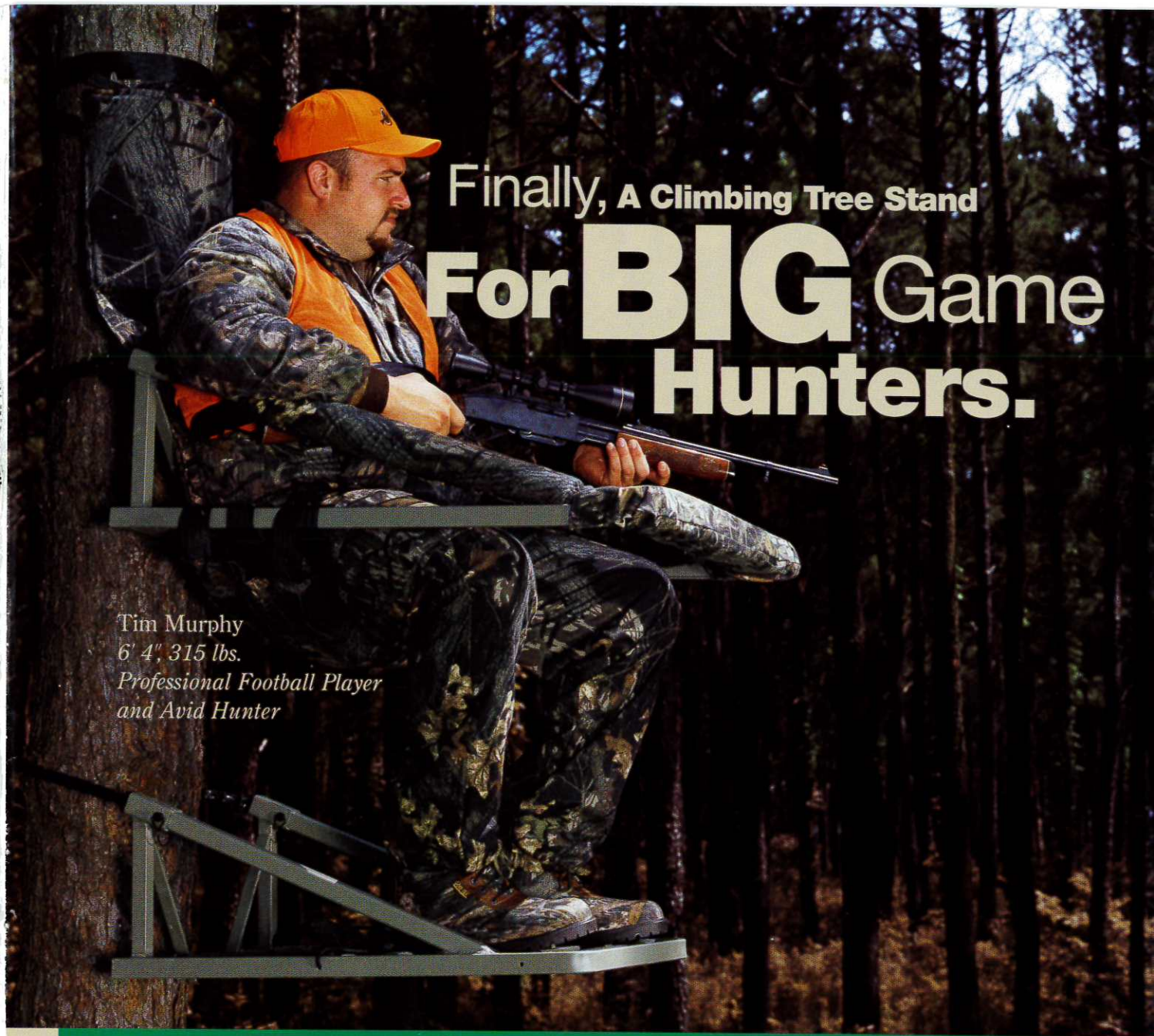
Before opening day, get with all of your hunters and set specific harvest goals for bucks and does. If in doubt, err to the conservative side on buck harvest and to the liberal side on doe harvest. And as part of your effort to minimize loss of young bucks, be sure to remind everyone not to shoot any button bucks (buck fawns).

Every deer harvested must be fully documented according to: sex, age, weight, antler dimensions, lactating/pregnant, etc. – no exceptions! Yes, it's easy to get caught up in the thrill of taking a big buck and forget to weigh him, and it's tempting not to remove the jawbone from a doe when you're late for work. But you *must* gather good data.

Finally, have your "check station" – the place where you take your kills to gather and record data – fully operational before opening day. Make sure all hunters understand the need for good data and are well versed in the methods for collecting it.

CONCLUSION

Still think there's nothing to break up the long stretch between deer seasons? If you engage in all of the activities listed above, in no time at all, next season will be here. And then, before you know it, you'll be eager to start preparing for 2002!

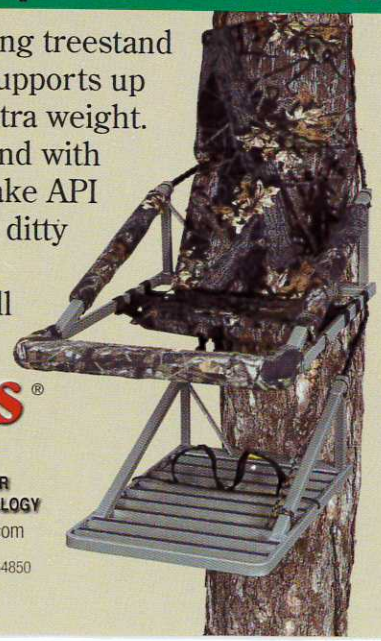


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