COLUMN

Dr. Deer's™ PRESCRIPTION

What Now? The Next Step.

By Dr. James C. Kroll

Last issue I began a series outlining what you need to be doing right now to benefit your management program. Remember, I told you there really is no need for a traditional census—other than satisfying the state's requirements for reporting—because, I never have seen a census that was accurate yet! The one exception, of course, is the infrared-triggered camera census, which often is too expensive for you to conduct at the level needed for accurate numbers. Our studies have shown strategically placing cameras can give you a very accurate estimate of your buck-to-doe ratio and recruitment rate. So, last issue I focused on what you can learn from the camera inventory using these devices. This issue, it's time to move on to the next step in your management program: assessing your current nutritional situation.

The last few years have not been kind to many parts of the Lone Star State. Whether it be "global warming" or normal climatic cycles, rainfall patterns have been sporadic and unpredictable. I was down in the brush country last spring and it literally looked like the surface of the moon. But, it also looked that way in the 50s and the 80s, so planning for drought is a normal activity in deer management. Even here in the Pineywoods of eastern Texas (where I live), drought has become a significant factor.

Whether your hunting territory or land is in the woods or brush land, the process of nutritional assessment is the same. Walk around your place, stopping periodically to ask yourself: "What is there for deer to eat here that is nutritious and available 365 days?" More often than not, the answer is, "Not much!" The next step is to devise ways to improve both the quality and quantity of deer foods. This may include vegetation management, adjusting grazing pressure from the ultimate exotic (cattle), reduction in deer numbers, water availability, food-plot potential and prepared feed access. Vegetation management is one of those activities that's not really very clamorous, but one the most critical components to a successful management program.

The phrase "vegetation management" encompasses a host of activities, depending on where you property is located and your own physical and economic capabilities. It's safe to say that a deer's world is only about 4.5 feet in height. Anything going on above this height is not relevant to a deer. So, quality deer habitat has foods consistently available in the "deer zone."

Even in very arid climates such as South Texas, vegetation management for deer is a "war" against vegetation growth. Here in the Pineywoods, young trees and shrubs quickly grow about the deer zone and close canopy, sometimes in less than five years. Once the canopy closes, production of important foods such as forbs (weeds) diminishes. So, as the Peanuts character Linus once said: "If you want to be a good ecologist, you are going to have to stir up a little dirt!" Whitetails are geared to respond positively to disturbance. If you want more deer food, you are going to have to disturb your habitats, but in the proper landscape context.

As noted in previous articles, the basic management unit for whitetails

is 80 acres, 100 acres being close enough. Therefore, overlay a map or aerial of your property with an 80- to 100–acre grid, and determine what you can do to increase natural foods in this grid. What you do depends on where your land is located. In southeastern areas, this usually involves cutting of timber in the form of harvests or thinnings. In the more arid southwest, it may mean roller-chopping. In both areas, prescribed burning works well, but there are so many burn bans on these days burning often is not feasible.

Cattle can be best friends or the worst enemies to whitetails. You cannot pay for what they can do positively, and you cannot afford what they can do negatively to your land. Proper grazing to remove primarily perennial grasses is very positive, but in "momma cow" operations, there is no option for getting cattle off the range when times are tough.

You will hear that cattle are grazers, but let the grass disappear and they turn to browsing quickly. That's why I like stocker steers, because they can be moved or sold more easily. At the Fennessey Ranch near Corpus Christi, my friend Brien O'Conner Dunn uses short duration, high intensity grazing to reproduce what the buffalo once did to the landscape. In so doing, he has greatly enhanced the productive capacity of his range, by favoring early successional weeds and grasses.

Reducing the number of deer on a property is a "hateful" concept to many managers and landowners. The false assumption is more deer means more fawns, which means more bucks. Hard as it is to accept, fewer deer on the range usually translates to higher recruitment and more bucks, not the opposite. If you are not recruiting at least 70 percent of your fawns from fall to the following spring, you are not doing a good job of management! Remember, you determine recruitment from your infrared camera surveys and incidental sightings.

Every cattleman knows the availability of water greatly influences the distribution of cattle on the range. Yet, few deer managers realize this fact. A deer needs about one-half gallon of water per day. Yes, they can get water from plants, but free water is the best way to satisfy this need. Just as in cattle, making more water available evenly on the property can spread out browsing intensity. I have been working with the Dos Gringos Ranch near Alice, Texas, for about two years. Owners Al and Quad Boenker have done a wonderful job of carrying out all my recommendations, not the least of which is providing free water. Using a water line supplied by two wells, we have installed 28 "leaky" faucets and small tub water troughs evenly over their 800 acres. Even through a drought, the deer use these water sources faithfully, spreading out the deer herd. This does not include all the small game and non-game animals benefiting from this practice. This level of management intensity is allowing Al and Quad to greatly increase the production of new deer, at an affordable cost.

In areas where there's at least 25 inches of rainfall annually, food plots are the best way to increase forage quality; however, even in areas traditionally having adequate rainfall, droughts do happen. For example, here in eastern Texas our research facility is supposed to receive, on average, 48 inches per year. I have lost track of the last time we had an "average" rainfall. Drought, followed by floods, have become the norm in the Pineywoods. So, even in an area amenable to forage crops, I always use free-choice feeders to pick up the slack during bad times. Too often, though landowners and managers are too lazy to plant food plots, they opt to use feed instead. "I use rainfall in a bag," one operator recently told me, "It's a lot easier." The difference in cost is about a penny per pound for cultivated forages and as much as 15 cents per pound for feed. Additionally, there can be problems with feeding, not encountered with food plots.

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In a future "Up on a Stump" column, I will launch a tirade about some of the feeding practices currently en vogue, especially in South Texas; one guaranteed to make a lot of folks angry. But, feeding practices more often than not are not according to a plan that considers the specific nutritional needs of whitetails. Suffice it to say, you need one feeder per 80-100 acres; and, if you can plant food plots, place a feeder near each plot.

So, to get back to the title of this article, what should you be doing right now? Follow the above recommendations. It's time to critically evaluate what your deer have to eat, how nutritious this food is and how much of the year good food is available. After this analysis, design a nutrition plan that will meet your deer's needs on a 365-day basis. Now that you have some idea of the composition of your herd and its current recruitment rate from the camera study, the next step is to produce a nutrition plan to works in your area. There's no one-size-fits-all answer, just one that is site-specific to your property.

Next issue, I will answer the question: "Which deer should I shoot this season?"