It's Spring, Now What?

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.





It has been exciting to be part of the rapidly expanding interest in private deer management.

There was a time when folks thought about deer only just prior to and during the hunting season. Once over, the corn feeder that had been so popular both for the hunter and deer remained swinging in the cold February wind, providing little in the way of nutrition.

Some three-and-a-half decades since I began my career, it's now a far different world. Deer hunting and management have become a 365/24/7 affair, with a huge industry evolving around the white-tailed deer. Our latest data suggest in Texas alone it has become a multi-billion dollar enterprise! Yet, although interest is high, solid strategies for managing your deer, or even planning for the next hunting season, remain elusive.

As I write this column, we are heading into spring. What you choose to do over the next few months will have a great deal to do with the quality of antlers next fall and your ability to fill your tag with a trophy buck. So let's discuss what you need to be doing right now.

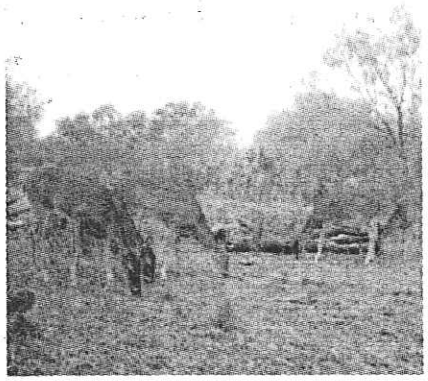
From a management perspective, the nutrition a buck receives February through April will set the stage for the size of his antlers next fall. I annually conduct "health

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checks" on the properties I manage. These involve shooting a sample of deer (under permit) and conducting what are referred to as necropsies - the deer equivalent of an autopsy.

During these examinations, I collect data on reproductive success, body condition and overall health of each animal. Measurements of fetal head-to-rump length tells me with 95% accuracy when the fawn was conceived. When combined with data from the entire sample of does, I get a very good idea of the consistency of the rut. When a doe is bred will have a great deal to do with the survival of her fawns. Other important health indices are kidney fat, parasite loads, bone marrow condition and body weight.

Now, these are things you probably will not be able to do. So what can you do to obtain similar information? One of the most important things you can do is to assess the "recruitment" rate of your herd. This is far different from "fawn crop," which is a percentage estimate of fawn survival in October.



Recruitment is the real thing you need to know about your herd. It is the number or percentage of the fawns produced last spring that are alive in late winter. Rather than conducting highly technical necropsies, you should spend some time on your land or lease counting the number of last year's fawns and does you see.

Since we were responsible for infrared-triggered cameras, we like to put out several of these devices overlooking bait. The photos resulting from such studies can be examined by counting the number of does and fawns in each image. Once captured, this data can be used to calculate the recruitment of your herd. You also can use the photographs to determine the health and abundance of bucks post-winter.

On one of the places I manage, we conduct a deer stand survey involving all of our hunters sitting in their deer stands from sunrise to noon on one day in February. Each observer counts the numbers of bucks, does and fawns he sees on this day. We have found this strategy to be effective in providing an unbiased estimate of buck and fawn survival as well as recruitment.

My necropsies almost always reveal a significant fact. Bucks and does might as well be different species! W hen bucks are fat, does are skinny and when does are fat, bucks are skinny. February finds bucks in pretty

When areas. Differences in kidney fat in winter are as different as daylight and dark. It often takes two hands to hold a doe's kidney, because there is so much fat. A buck's kidney, on the other hand, is barely covered with any fat; reflecting the cost of the rut.

So your spring management strategy should be aimed at increasing the nutrition of your bucks. The does don't mind these efforts as well. If you are in an area with 35 inches or more rainfall annually, you should have planted food plots last fall. We plant a mixture of cold hardy oats, chicory and clover (red, arrowleaf or crimson). Our experience is spring plantings usually are a waste of time and money. The chicory and clover will carry over as well as any spring crop.

If you are in a more arid area, you should have implemented a year-round or at least a fall-to- spring feeding program. There are many pelleted rations on the market and most are good for deer. Feed should be provided free-choice and at a rate of one feeder for at least every 160 acres. Corn runs a far distant last as a deer feed, but It is better than nothing. These days, corn is about as expensive as pellets, so you might as well go with the best.

If allowed in your area, you might also consider some

tried-and-true habitat management strategies such as prescribed fire. After the year we just had in many areas in Texas, you might not even want to discuss fire. But in the right hands, prescribed fire is one of the best management tools in late winter to increase spring forages.

Otherwise, you might consider fall disking and fertilization of native vegetation. Applications of phosphate works very well over much of the southern whitetail's range. Disking increases weeds if you conduct this activity in the fall. Spring weeds germinate in the fall and mature in late spring.

Early spring is also a great time to go shed hunting. In some areas, you might get yourself a good pair of snake leggings, but collecting sheds is an important activity, both for hunting and management. Sheds tell you a great deal about the quality of bucks on your range, particularly the younger bucks.

Now, I am not one of those writers who will tell you bucks can be aged from their antler bases (they cannot), but I am telling you the number of mainframe points an obviously young buck has is an indication of the success of your program. Calculate the 10:8-point ratio. If you are doing a good job of management, the ratio should favor the 10-pointers. Also, from a hunting perspective, map out the locations of the sheds, either on an aerial photograph or using GPS and mapping software. These locations will tell you where your bucks were at the end of the season.

Spring is also a great time to map the locations of rubs on your hunting territory. Again, use either an aerial or GPS unit. I have found mapping rub lines will allow you to "connect the dots," which will show you exactly the travel corridors on your land.

We conducted an experiment in which we killed all the deer off a fenced property. After three years without deer, the newly stocked bucks used the same rub lines, the same scrape areas, the same staging areas and the same sanctuaries as their long-departed predecessors. Deer are like bass, they like structure. Learning to recognize dee structure will greatly enhance next fall's success.

These are just a few things you can do right no to improve your deer herd and hunting success. Eac season, there are equally important activities for th year-round deer hunter or manager. These activitie turn what once was a month or two deer season into year-round endeavor.