

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

What Is Management? Part 3

Nutrition is the *most* important aspect of quality deer management. We once listed the three factors as age, nutrition and genetics. Now, it's nutrition, age and genetics. I learned early in my career that high-quality nutrition could cause a younger buck to have larger antlers. That is why we always look at nutrition first when developing a management plan.

NUTRITION — THE CRITICAL FACTOR

There are two ways to improve nutrition: 1) increase native forage, and 2) provide supplemental nutrition. Unfortunately, those who fail at deer management more often than not fail to consider nutrition. Good forest and range management is not exciting, but it is the cornerstone of nutrition. Landowners often want their land to look like a wilderness, with huge old trees and open understory. Sadly, these are biological deserts for deer! A young forest, with vigorously growing understory plants, is a deer factory.

In your self-analysis, consider what you are doing to increase native foods. Walk around your property, stop periodically and ask, "What is there for deer to eat right here, most of the years?" If the answer is "Not much," you then need to ask what you can do to increase the food supply. The answer might be timber thinning, prescribed burning or even fertilization of native plants. You have to do something to provide a sustained supply of forage on at least one-third of every 80-acre block.

This is where supplemental feeding — either in the form of food plots or feeding (where legal) — can be a significant management practice. In areas with 35 inches or more of rainfall per year, food plots are the most economical and effective supplemental feeding practice. In areas with less rainfall, only supplemental feeding is feasible. Even where legal, supplemental feeding can be a controversial practice. But when done correctly it is beneficial. By *correctly,* I mean as a supplement, not as replacement feeding.

Also remember this: If you are *not* managing your native habitat and *not* controlling your doe herd, there is *no* place for feeding in your program. Disease issues can be real, but as with humans, healthy deer are resistant to disease. You also need to consider that deer on a good range will eat about 2 pounds of feed a day. Feed prices are rising precipitously, and when you consider it costs only about two cents per day to supply food plot forage, you can see why we favor plantings!

You should have about 2 percent of your land planted in food plots. In the Northern climates, food plots provide most of the forage during the spring/fall period, while in the South food plots can be effective almost year 'round. In Michigan, we try to grow as much green forage as we can before the first frost. After this time, a good snow cover will ensure a supply of "standing hay" for our deer. In either climate, the goal should be to put your deer into the winter in as good a condition as possible. The physiology of whitetails is well suited to getting by with less during the winter, but they must have enough fat reserves to reach spring green-up.

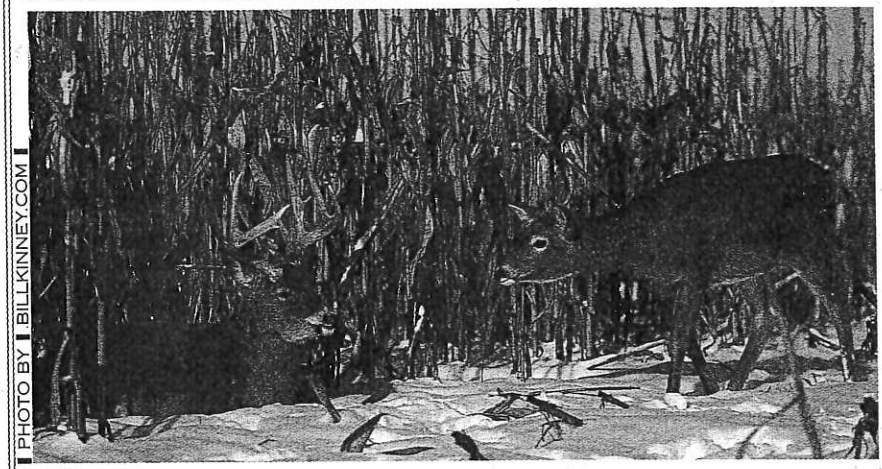


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There are two ways to improve nutrition. One is to increase native forage, and the other is to provide supplemental nutrition. However, population control is also a vital part of any successful quality management program.

THE NEIGHBOR FACTOR

In past articles I've often pointed out that many hunters see a buck for three seconds: deer . . . buck . . . *boom!* Our studies have shown that the No. 1 reason for landowners to build high fences is frustration. They try to manage for older-age bucks, only to have their neighbors shoot the yearling they let walk. No matter how much land you have, your neighbors are affecting your herd quality. So, if your management program is not working, try sitting down with your neighbors and talking about it.

We've found that showing them the photographs of young bucks from your property does more good than harm. We once put together 1,200 acres, representing more than a dozen landowners. We placed a poster with photographs of a 2-year old buck and showed how he was photographed on every property. "Well, I was going to let my son hunt that buck," said one cooperator, "but now I realize he will not be hunting *my* buck, but rather *our* buck!" Building pride in the community deer herd can be very effective. Yes, there will be those who do not want to cooperate, but peer-group pressure can be very effective.

If you can't change the attitudes of others, it's time to change yours. That means lowering your expectations to match the conditions. Our research area in eastern Texas is high-fenced, primarily due to our scientific need to

control herd size. However, before we fenced, our strategy was to make the research center *the* place to be, "one-stop shopping" for our deer. Our goal was to over-winter as many yearling bucks as possible by providing adequate escape cover and food. Our deer herd tripled after opening day each year! We only produce one 3-year-old buck, but we more than doubled the availability of 2-year-olds.

THE PUBLIC HUNTER

Although this series is aimed at private landowners, I do not want to leave out those of you who do not own land. It is incumbent on your state agency to manage deer for you. Unfortunately, the norm for deer management across much of the continent has been "traditional" management — meaning the old "hunter opportunity" model. In the past, bucks-only harvest seriously deteriorated quality, both of bucks and of the hunting experience. Today, more and more states are adopting an ecological or quality management approach. In evaluating what your state is doing to improve deer hunting, you should ask if your agency is doing the following:

1) Assessing habitat quality by geographic region on an annual basis.

2) Conducting annual health checks by geographic region.

3) Taking steps to reduce yearling buck harvest.

4) Determining recruitment.

5) Increasing harvest of does (not antlerless deer, but females).

6) Supporting private landowners through technical assistance.

Some states also are designating quality management areas and practicing quality deer management on them for the non-landed hunter. Regulations such as size limits on bucks will work on such areas and at the same time help out with the "neighbor factor." In spite of what you may have heard, size limits will work — as long as they are coupled with population control and increased nutrition.

I hope this series has been of help in assessing where your management program is headed. Deer management too often has been treated like a buffet line. A fellow goes down the line and adds only the things he likes to his tray. Deer management is a package deal. You either do everything or nothing at all!