

Managing Deer On Oklahoma's Private Lands

By Mike Shaw, Wildlife Division research supervisor

Over the past twenty-five years, Oklahoma deer hunters have witnessed what was once thought to be virtually impossible in the Sooner State.

In 1975, the statewide deer harvest was 9,677 deer, and one of the goals of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's fledgling deer management program was to manage the herd for a sustained harvest of 20,000 deer. It took 13 years to reach that goal and Oklahoma hunters have set record harvest for 14 of the last 17 years. Although final harvest figures for the 2000 seasons aren't available yet, it's clear that the total harvest will top 100,000 deer.

No doubt, these are great times for Oklahoma deer hunters, but recent successes have also brought some mighty big challenges. One of the reasons for the explosive population increase was an under-harvest of does. An adequate doe harvest is essential to curb herd growth, and their under-harvest over the years created herds with sometimes greatly skewed sex ratios.

Although deer herds can be managed on a harvest unit level, there are often pockets of habitat which would benefit from more intensive management. In 1991, the Department conceived a program that would assist private landowners who wanted to manage the deer herd on their property with specific goals in mind.

Wildlife biologists who designed the program agreed that landowners who met the criteria and were willing to work closely with the Department should be given the tools to accomplish their deer management objectives. The following year, the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) was implemented.

Managing deer is not a difficult task if the right information is available. The goal of the landowner/cooperator may be to maximize harvest potential on a particular piece of property or it may be to manage for quality or trophy bucks. In either case, if the right components are present, biologists can tailor a program to meet the cooperator's objectives. The key to success is forging a cooperative relationship between the biologist and the landowner, understanding the cooperator's goals and evaluating the habitat component.

Secondarily, biologists will explain the data collection process designed to assess the population components present. Data collection begins in late summer

The success of DMAP since its debut has been remarkable. The 1992 season began with 11 cooperators and 99,540 acres enrolled in the program. The initial season produced 431 deer of which 58 percent were does. The program has continued to grow each year, and during the 1999 season, 135 cooperators enrolled 659,148 acres and harvested 2,721 deer. During the past eight years of the program, the percentage of does harvested on DMAP properties has averaged nearly 60 percent compared to the statewide average of 33 percent. Many cooperators and hunters are now beginning to reap the rewards from their hard work.

The program continues to be popular with hunters and landowners alike. This season's growth resulted in 154 cooperators enrolling 710,412 acres. The number of deer harvested on DMAP properties during the 2000 season will approach 3,500 deer. While this number may not seem impressive at first glance, consider that DMAP deer account for 3.5 percent of the total deer harvest on 1 percent of Oklahoma's land base.

with spotlight counts to determine a few basic herd parameters. Buck/doe and fawn/doe ratios can be very helpful in evaluating current population status.

Once the season is underway, the Department furnishes all the tools necessary to collect a variety of biological information from deer harvested on the property. The information is summarized and furnished to the cooperator at the end of the season. Over several years, these data will enable the biologist to formulate and refine a harvest strategy that will eventually produce the desired results.

Deer management goals may vary considerably, and despite the best intentions, achieving the final goal, is often dependent on the size of the property enrolled. Good deer hunting can occur on parcels of land as small as 40-60 acres.

However, implementing a management strategy that is capable of having an impact on a deer herd requires control over a much larger property. Even the 1,000-acre minimum is inadequate if the objective is to produce trophy bucks. Production of trophy bucks requires complete protection of immature bucks, allowing them to reach 4 1/2 to 8 1/2 years of age before they are harvested. Landowners with the minimum of 1,000 acres simply do not have enough control over the deer on their property. Hunters may exercise strict restraint in harvesting young bucks on the enrolled property only to have those bucks harvested on adjacent lands. For DMAP to be most effective, the size of the property should be as large as possible. Several adjoining landowners may get together to meet the minimum acreage required, and as long as all of the landowners have a common

goal, the program can be effective.

The Department spent considerable time this past year evaluating the deer management program. Part of that process involved examining DMAP for possible improvements. What's in store for DMAP in 2001? Since the basic concepts of DMAP have been so successful, the only change deemed necessary at this time will be the enrollment and permitting process. During their regular monthly meeting in February, the Commission voted to adopt a recommendation to eliminate the \$7.00 antlerless DMAP permit fee and modify the enrollment fee.

Beginning with the 2001 season, DMAP enrollment fees will be based on the size of the property. If you are enrolling 1,000 – 4,999-acres, the annual enrollment fee will be \$200.00. The enrollment fee for properties of 5000 acres or more will be \$400.00. In the long run this change should be very beneficial. It will encourage better use of the free permits, reduce administrative paperwork, simplify permit allocation, and reduce the chance of permits being lost in the mail and not reaching the cooperator when they are needed.

If you think you might be interested in DMAP, you can contact the Wildlife Division at 405/521-2739 and ask for a pamphlet explaining the program in more detail.

