

Doe Harvesting: Is Timing Critical?

“Not today,” I mumbled to myself as I screwed the bottom tree step into an old, crooked black cherry. A quick check of my watch showed 4:40 p.m., meaning I was late to my key evening stand. It was the opening week of the Pennsylvania bow season and some cooler weather had finally moved in.

I hurriedly climbed to my hang-on stand and secured my safety harness. The stand sat on the edge of a white oak patch and overlooked about 30 acres of soybeans. By this time of the year, the soybeans had turned a pale brown, a stage that tends to be a little less attractive to whitetails. However, the small property consisted mainly of islands of woods in the soybean fields. Pushing too far into the woods increases the likelihood of bumping a mature buck and significantly decreases the chance of seeing him during daylight.

About an hour before dark, deer started making their way from the white oak bedding area to the field. A doe and her fawn skirted the woods and headed straight toward my stand. Next, a respectable 8-point appeared and made his way to the field.

Decision time. Do I wait for a chance at the buck, or do I shoot that mature doe when she steps into bow range in a few seconds? It wasn't a hard decision. This property is overrun with deer and, because of its small size, there are not a lot of hunters available to harvest does.

Thump!

The arrow found its mark, and the doe ran just 60 yards before collapsing. The first venison of the year was in hand!

Ingredients for Success

Deer management consists of three main components: habitat management, people management and herd management.

The herd management component includes such demographics as recruitment rate, age structure, sex ratio and overall population size. Doe management is an important objective — and far too often overlooked — within the herd component considerations.

Why it is overlooked is a question I cannot explain.

Let's face it, 99 percent of doe management is to just harvest them! However, the common question from

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TOP 4 STRATEGIES FOR REMOVING WHITE- TAILED DOES FROM OVERPOPULATED LANDS.

landowners who employ doe management is, “When should I harvest them?”

In our experiences, we have found that landowners fall into four main categories with regards to doe hunting strategies. We also find that most hunters don't realize they fall into one of these categories until they stop and reflect for a moment. Perhaps you don't even realize it, but subconsciously you conform to one of the strategies we detail in this article. Some hunters might even identify how their philosophies have evolved throughout their careers. Which category most accurately defines your doe harvest strategy?

The first, and most popular category, is what we call “sprint harvesting.” Landowners and hunters following this strategy begin the season with a flurry, harvesting every doe possible. However, as the rut approaches things do a complete flop and all focus is on harvesting bucks, while does are passed. If the season continues through the post-rut, these hunters will begin harvesting does again.

The second commonly practiced doe harvest strategy is the complete opposite. In this method, no does are harvested early in the season. However, when the rut begins to heat up they are shot “at will.”

The third strategy is putting off doe harvests until bucks are shot, which in many cases is equivalent to putting it off until the end of the season.

The last method is harvesting does any time the opportunity presents itself until the management quota is reached (or ethics and legality permit). With that being said, let's examine all of them in greater detail.

1. Sprint Harvesting

Anticipation has been building for months. The night before the season opener, hunters toss and turn with dreams of the next morning's hunt. Most hunters are



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on edge to catch a glimpse of the first whitetail of the season, and hunters that fall into the “sprint harvesting” category are ready to drop the hammer on the first doe that walks within range.

The first advantage to this technique is that deer tend to be less cautious at this time because they have yet to feel any real human pressure and tend to be more vulnerable to harvest. Another benefit is that hunter enthusiasm and participation are high. Also, it is fairly easy to distinguish between a doe and a buck fawn early in the season.

The final benefit of this strategy — our favorite as biologists and private consultants — is the chance to balance the adult sex ratio prior to the rut.

A balanced sex ratio can lead to a more intense rutting period (a benefit for all of us who sit on stand). From a hunting standpoint, this makes mature bucks a little more vulnerable to harvest. From a management standpoint, it typically ensures the breeding of does during their first estrous cycle, leading to a better-timed fawning season.

In the 1980s, researchers at Mississippi State University performed harvest simulations on a deer herd. They found that shooting does before the peak rut allowed the maximum number of does to be bred during their first estrous cycle of the season.

Although the sprint harvesting strategy looks flawless on the surface, there are some key disadvantages. One that might not affect all landowners is hunting pressure, especially if it is a small parcel. More hunters and increased human activity in the woods also leads to greater pressure on the property. Although your rutting activity might be more intense, the prior pressure might have bumped some of the old, wise, mature bucks.

An obvious disadvantage that every hunter has thought about is the “imaginary” buck. This deer might or might not be lagging behind the does.

No management discussion on does should go without mentioning does with fawns and the avoidance of shooting button bucks. Many hunters tend to have problems harvesting a doe with fawns. Many will say, “I’ll pass on a doe with fawns to take the one that is alone.” However, hunters should be extremely cautious when harvesting a lone antler-



On properties overrun with deer, sometimes the best management plan is to shoot any adult doe that offers the opportunity.

TRACY SCHMIDT

less deer because nine times out of 10 it is a care-less button buck ahead of its mother.

Another common quote is, “If I harvest the doe when her fawns still have spots they are too young to survive on their own.” Rarely will you ever encounter a fawn with its mother that is too young to make it on its own. The fact is most fawns are able to survive on their own, without adverse effects, at three weeks of age. Most fawns that we see “at heel” are at least 2 months old.

I also hear, “I want that buck fawn to receive all the milk and nutrients as long as possible so he grows up to be the ‘big’ one.”

Typically, before the buck’s first birthday, he will be chased out of the area by his mother. Research suggests this natural tendency is Mother Nature’s hand in population genetics. The buck that you wanted to maximize milk intake has now been booted off of your property and is likely to be harvested by someone other than yourself. However, research further indicates that if the doe is harvested, it is likely her buck fawn will not disperse when he’s a yearling.

Another disadvantage to this technique is the possibility that the lack of harvesting does during the rut might not allow the landowner to fill the doe quota. In Pennsylvania, hunters are able to really get after the does during the post rut because the two-week firearm season falls during that time period. However, in Mississippi (where both authors have acquired formal educa-tions), the rut can occur for the last 1½ months of the season. If a landowner’s

doe quota is not filled prior to the rut in these areas, they need to re-think their doe harvest strategy.

2. Wait Until the Rut

Hunters know that too much pressure in an area can not only ruin the stand site for a while but possibly the season. Not as popular as the other strategies, waiting until the rut to shoot does is more common with hunters and landowners who do not hunt with a bow or muzzleloader. This strategy puts little or no pressure on the herd until rutting activity picks up. When the time is right, hunters will shoot both does and bucks when they can.

The advantage of this strategy is that hunter participation and enthusiasm is typically high during the rut. However, the rut might not be as intense if the adult sex ratio is out of whack.

This method has a few distinct disadvantages. As discussed previously, the imaginary buck comes into play, especially during the rut. Not many hunters want to sit all day during the rut only to “ruin” it by shooting a doe.

Another flaw to this plan is that doe movement might be down during the breeding season and, depending on the area, there might not be much time left to hunt. Mississippi’s rut typically begins in late December/early January and can last to the end of the hunting season; that doesn’t leave a lot of time to make your doe quota.

3. The Procrastinator

“Today’s forecast: sunny, unseasonably warm, highs in the 60s.” These are words that make a Pennsylvania late-season muzzleloading hunter nauseated. It’s the last week of the season, and the weather is horrible. Deer movement is stalled out, and the close to a long season is near. Simply put, you’re not going to meet your doe quota.

Scenes like this can ruin a great season, especially if you have put off shooting does. This management plan does not end well 99 percent of the time. By this time of the year, the herd has been pressured, all deer activity has decreased, and hunter participation can be low. For most hunters, the holidays have come and gone and it’s back to the grind.

There are no advantages to be discussed here. However, it is not always a position found by laziness. Maybe you hunted hard to meet the quota but the

deer were not cooperative, work was busy, or weather conditions were poor.

4. At Will

The old military phrase “fire at will!” has been used in battles for decades. The phrase is also well received in the battle between land managers and deer.

“At will” doe management refers to any chance that is reasoned as feasible. Some years the harvests drag to the end of the season only to fall short. Other years, you might meet your quota early and then focus on a mature buck.

Time is the main advantage with at-will doe management. By starting at the beginning of the season and not stopping until quota (or season’s end) has been reached allows maximum chance to perform your management duties.

Time also reduces the amount of mistakes (confusing a buck fawn for a doe) that are typically associated with rushed situations. Note that the title of this article is *not* “Antlerless Harvests: Is Timing Important?” This is because far too often buck fawns are killed and claimed as an antlerless kill (where legal). Shooting an incidental buck fawn is not detrimental in areas where deer populations are at all-time highs. However, females should be your focus while hunting, not just a deer without antlers. Shooting a doe will remove a “population inflator” from the herd.

Conclusion

Of the four strategies, the at-will plan is the best plan for landowners and hunters who want to create a healthy, quality deer herd.

Although the others have advantages, the disadvantages — mainly not meeting the quota — outweigh these. Remember, these four strategies are not straight forward. Certain situations might fall into two or more categories.

Bottom line: Doe harvesting can be just as important as other management categories. Failing to meet your harvest goals can negate the positive effects of habitat and people management.

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