

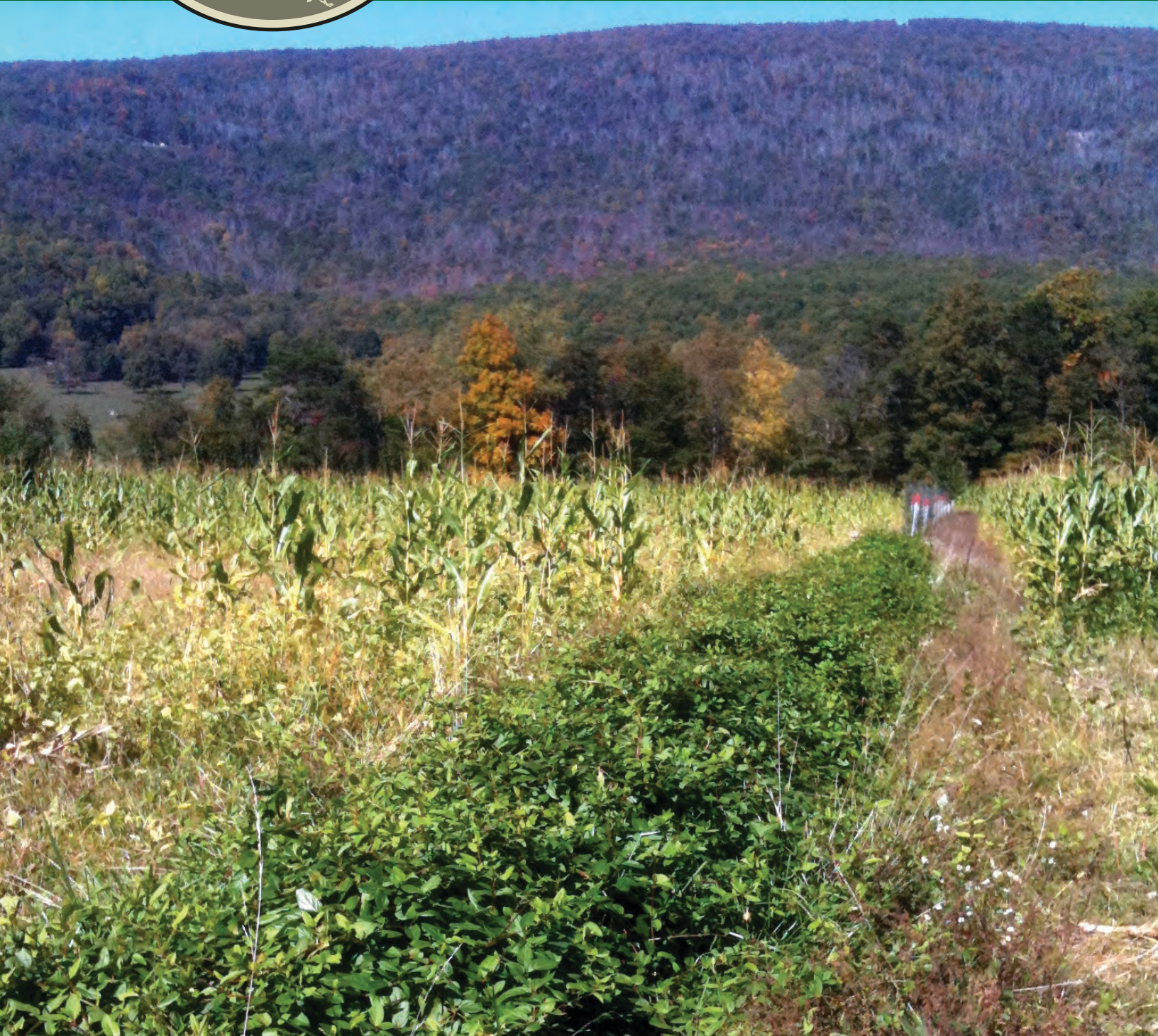


PRACTICAL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

Wildlife Trends **JOURNAL**

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

VOLUME 25, ISSUE 5



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Earl Says...

I sincerely apologize for the lateness of this September/October issue. Because of a new computer and software, we have had one problem after another. Thank you for your patience and we will do everything we can to be on time in the future.

On a positive note...it's deer season throughout most of the Southeast! And even though I believe it rained just about every day this spring and summer here in Alabama, we're now in a drought and plan to plant our green fields this weekend then pray for that rain we badly need. Good luck to you all and see you next issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Earl'.



Wildlife Trends JOURNAL

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www.wildlifetrends.com
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Wildlife Trends Journal is published to provide landowners, land managers and wildlife enthusiasts the latest research-based information in wildlife and game management. Article authors are carefully selected for specific expertise in their respective fields. Subscribers receive six bi-monthly issues and a handsome library binder to save their past issues.

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Wild Turkey Population Decline

By Ron Jolly



In 2010, concerns of wild turkey population declines were being discussed by Wild Turkey Working Groups. These groups were comprised of state agency biologists who recognized, based on survey data, that poult recruitment into fall flocks had diminished, averaging less than two poults per hen.

Research from the past yielded the knowledge that the average of two poults per hen indicated a stable population. Any number above two poults per hen indicated a growing population.

When brought to the attention of state agency heads this suspicion of

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declining wild turkey populations was not pursued due to limited technology and resources to actually achieve accurate poult recruitment data at scale. Furthermore, variable approaches to determine population dynamics in each state only added inconsistency to understanding turkey populations that bridged between states in similar physiographic regions. The end result was the assumption that if there were a decline it probably could be attributed to the natural ebbs and flows in all ground nesting birds along with the byproduct that occurs after new species are established where populations artificially peak at a high level and tail off over time.

As an outdoor writer and producer of outdoor television and hunting videos, my travels have taken me all

over the United States in pursuit of gobbling turkeys. My six plus decades spent in the turkey woods have afforded me the privilege of witnessing these great birds' miraculous comeback from the brink of extinction to state-agency-run hunting seasons in 49 states. In 2001 it was proclaimed that they had been re-established in every habitat capable of sustaining a wild flock, even in places where turkeys were not native to that area.

All was well in the wild turkey world for me and everyone who loved and hunted them, but in 2018 something ominous became apparent to me. It was obvious that there were just not as many turkeys in many of the places that heralded booming populations 10 years prior. The real clincher was the situation on our own land in Alabama. Our winter flock was in serious decline and had dropped from an average of 50 birds to less than 10 birds in 2019.

Skin In the Game

In June 2020, I convened a meeting at White Oak Plantation in Alabama that included myself and 13 veteran turkey hunters from across the Southeast. We were there to discuss what we perceived as population decline of wild turkeys. After that initial meeting we agreed to meet again in August. At that meeting, twelve people contributed \$300 each to try to make a difference. In February 2021, Turkeys For Tomorrow was born with the issuance of a federal 501(c)3 non-profit status. In 2023 we re-defined our mission statement to better reflect our fundamental goal: *We will save wild turkeys with science-based solutions for long-term sustainability.*

Today, less than five years after the launch of Turkeys For Tomorrow, (TFT), it is widely accepted that wild turkey populations are in seri-

ous decline in many parts of the United States. TFT has or is funding research projects in ten states with multiple projects ongoing in some of those states. TFT is currently working with biologists, state agencies and universities to launch six additional research projects in 2026.

Other Non-Government Agencies (NGO's) have also responded and today there is more energy, research and financial support directed at reversing the wild turkey population decline than ever before.

TFT was founded on the belief that to find answers, you have to ask the right questions. In order to do that we have leaned on university professors, state biologists and hunters (citizen scientists). We do not believe that scientifically proving the answer to one question is not the problem is a failure. We simply check that box, ask the next question and prove the scientific answer.

Questions like, "Why is nesting success so poor in Iowa? Is disease playing a role in Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi and Texas? Is it poult rearing or nesting habitat across the Southeast? Is it fertility or disease in Kentucky and Alabama?" The list goes on, all the while narrowing down the possibilities of the root cause.



Individual broods were released into different types of habitat on the second day after hatching



Poults were curious but in a cautious way, often looking back to the mother hen (researcher) as if seeking assurance.

The Poult Project

Marcus Lashley, PhD, Assistant Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation with the University of Florida is currently engaged in a research project that could reveal ground-breaking information. His theory is, if the problem is recruiting poults into winter flocks in sufficient numbers, why not learn more about what that takes.

"My experience and expertise is habitat," says Dr. Lashley. "In my efforts to educate myself and gain familiarity with the published turkey literature available I realized there was very little data on hatching and rearing poults and what was available indicated this may be a problem that could affect turkey populations. Will Gulsby, PhD,



Broods spent considerable time daily in the shade loafing, preening and dusting

Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Management, Auburn University and I had the idea to produce a podcast that served as an information source for anyone interested in all things wild turkey. In order to provide that information we needed to be fully aware of all the research published in the past. It was our goal to put that information out in language anyone interested could understand. When we pitched the idea to *Turkeys For Tomorrow*, they fully funded the podcast, and we were off to the races.”

“We have several projects ongoing now that involve turkeys. The one that is currently garnering the most attention is what we call the ‘Poult Project’ and it is extremely unique. We were very fortunate to partner with the National Wildlife Research Center in Gainesville, FL, which already had aviaries built which they used for bird research, and they were vacant. Another important factor was that the aviaries were large enough to manipulate the habitat and have various plant communities available to the poults. This allowed us to compare how a brood raised in natural herbaceous habitat fared compared to a brood raised in a planted or food plot environment. It was just a stroke of luck, but they were looking for proj-

ects and we had funding. The scope of the Poult Project is trying to understand what factors in habitat quality determine poult survival and success such as growth rates and foraging success. There are only a few empirical studies on poult rearing success and the ones that exist suggest there is a problem and might be limiting populations in some places. The other problem is the difficulty of studying poults in the wild. They are growing so rapidly, and we don’t have the technology to track them sufficiently in the wild to gather robust data. That

explains why there are so few studies on that life stage, but it does not decrease the importance of having that knowledge.”

Another fortunate coincidence was that Dr. Lashley and his staff at the University of Florida Game Lab (UFGL) were monitoring over one hundred GPS tagged hens in the Eastern and Osceola ranges of Florida. Permits were secured to recover eggs from the nests of hens that were killed or abandoned nests during the nesting period.

“We are able to determine when a hen has been killed by a signal issued by the transmitter. Once a nest is abandoned or the hen is killed there is a very short window of time to keep those doomed eggs viable. In order to do that we have to maintain a temperature and humidity similar to that of a hen sitting on the nest. Some of the eggs we salvaged were hours away from our lab and modern incubators. One of my technicians came up with the idea of heated grain, (Japanese millet seeds) and a small ice chest to maintain optimal egg temperature until they could be



Permits were secured to retrieve eggs from nests of hens that had been killed while laying or incubating.



Poults were observed in different plant communities to determine which communities were most beneficial and conducive to survival.

placed in the incubator,” said Dr. Lashley.

Intricate Details

When the eggs arrived at the lab they were measured, weighed and speckle patterns on the eggs were recorded. They were then placed in the incubator until they hatched. Individual clutches were kept separate from other clutches to see if genetic differences produced different behavior patterns. GPS data gave the researchers some idea of how long the eggs had been incubated by the hen but it was vital to know when the eggs would hatch so the researcher who was to become the mother hen was on hand and available for the next two weeks.



Over 80% of eggs retrieved from the wild hatched. Hatching took from one to 36 hours from first sign of pipping

“To better determine exact hatching dates, we used a method called “candling,” said Dr. Lashley. “Initially, researchers would hold the eggs in front of a candle flame. The light penetrated the egg enough to determine the position and size of unhatched poult

inside. Today we use a flashlight but still call the practice candling. Typically, two days before hatch the eggs would start to move, and we could hear the poult inside communicating with other poults in the clutch. At that time a technician, or mother hen, was assigned to a specific clutch and he or she would start talking or communicating with the unhatched poults. Candling also revealed that the unhatched poults had turned in the egg putting their head towards the large end of the egg. Poults utilize an egg tooth located on the end of their beaks to pip a small hole in the eggshell. From that point they pip a circle around the shell that breaks open, allowing the poult to emerge. Watching this was awe inspiring. Times from the first pipping activ-

ity to emergence from the egg varied from one hour to as much as 36 hours. From the first time they made eye contact you knew you had just witnessed a miracle, and you had just assumed the role of mother hen. We were pleased to see that over 80% of salvaged eggs hatched.”

Day One

On the first day individual broods are held in small tents large enough to accommodate the researcher and allow the poults room to explore. According to Dr. Lashley, each poult would lock eyes with the researcher as if looking for assurance. After that they would move about the tent exploring but often pausing to look back at the researcher to make sure mother hen was there. The entire day is spent building trust and offering encouragement. Researchers offered small insects to the poults in an effort to teach the poults what food looked like and strengthen the bond between poults and mother hen. Renowned turkey researcher Lovett Williams had witnessed hens offering insects to poults and included that fact in one of his published papers.



Individual feathers were measured four times daily to record growth rate of poult.



Each poult was weighed four times daily to determine weight gain. These weights were compared to poult brooding indifferent plant communities to help determine which plant communities were most beneficial to wild turkey poult.

Day Two

On day two the researcher leads the poult into the treatment area where they will be raised. The area is designed with different versions of habitat that allows the researcher to observe and record the plant community preferred by the poult.

“One thing that was really eye opening to me was the minute these two-day-old poult hit the ground, they immediately turned into raptors,” said Dr. Lashley. “Nobody had to show them what to do. They instinctively knew that if they found a bug and could swallow it, they did. They constantly checked to see where mother hen

was and willfully followed her (the researcher) wherever she led. They communicated verbally as well with soft whistles, kee kees and whines, stopping often to observe their surroundings. Also, on day two we began weighing each individual poult four times each day. We also measure certain feathers four times each day all to determine growth rates in a particular treatment area that could be compared to poult growth rates in different treatment areas.”

Day Three Through Thirteen

According to Dr. Lashley, these days were spent practicing the same routine. Poult would be led from where they spent the night in a small, heated tent into the treatment area to forage for food. Their diet was supplemented by regular feeding of a mixture of dried meal worms and fruit. There were regular intervals of loafing, (chilling in the shade).

“The most vulnerable time frame for poult in the wild is pre-flight. Once they can fly well enough to roost off the ground, generally their survival rate goes up substantially,” said Dr. Lashley. “If you look at the literature, that’s somewhere between 7 and 19 days, which is not very helpful if you are trying to design an experiment. We used netting, slightly taller than your knees, to limit their movement. We decided that when we could not keep them inside that perimeter, when they could fly over the netting, they reached flight. We placed several broods in these containment areas, and every brood reached flight on day 13. Once flight was achieved, they were released into the general population with other broods of similar age and development. They almost immediately began socializing in amalgamated groups just like they would do in the wild. We still

had researchers spending large amounts of time daily walking them around and continuing the mother hen role. It took an army of people to coordinate all this. Essentially, we are trying to keep them enriched while being very careful to observe and record everything on a scale. This would have been impossible to do in the wild. Another thing we noticed was that everything they did was innate. They instinctively knew to look up for danger, they knew that bright colored caterpillars were not to be eaten., loud noises produced behavioral responses consistent with what you would see in the wild. They were curious but in a cautious way.”

Dr. Lashley also shared that even though these broods were raised isolated from other broods until after flight, they all knew what turkeys were supposed to sound like. They have different sounds for different things but they all just know that.

Day Fourteen and Beyond

Dr.Lashley calls day14 graduation day. Restrictive nets are removed and it is the day poults are free to mingle with other broods in the enclosure. Researchers spend hours daily observing and recording food preferences, social activities, behaviors and interactions. The poults are still weighed and feathers are measured four times daily.

According to Dr. Lashley, these young turkeys will spend their natural lives in these enclosures, all the

while being studied and observed. There are multiple experiments planned to garner more information about them from hatch to end of life. He truly believes these findings could reveal pathways and management techniques that land-owners and managers can implement to improve turkey populations on the lands they manage.

Knowledge is powerful and it emboldens us to try new things. Is the answer to population decline in wild turkeys to be found by UFGL and the Poult Project? Only time will tell but documenting and proving facts about poult hatching and brood rearing can only be a positive thing for the future of wild turkeys.

Take A Chance

Earlier in this article I briefly mentioned the Wild Turkey Science Podcast. When Dr. Gulsby and Dr. Lashley approached us about sponsoring the podcast, TFT was at a critical juncture. We were midway through our third year of existence. I won't mention exact dollar figures but the asking amount was a reach for a fledgling organization. We asked what we could expect in return for the investment in the podcast and received a projection of 50,000 downloads. After deliberation by the TFT Board of Directors we agreed to be the sole sponsor for the Wild Turkey Science Podcast. Today we are well into year two of that agreement and downloads across all platforms are well into seven figures but that is the tip of the iceberg.

Dr. Lashley: “We recently asked our listeners to participate in a survey. Participation from our listeners was not great but there are a few things we learned that are worth mentioning. For instance, management practices or habitat improvements discovered by podcast listeners have been implemented on almost 2 million acres in hopes of improving turkey populations. The podcast has been downloaded in more than 100 countries across the world. The podcast has been downloaded in every state in our country and in every county in several states. TFT took a chance on the Wild Turkey Science Podcast, and the Podcast took a chance on TFT. In the end, wild turkeys are the winner and that is how it should be!”

Closing Thoughts

From my perspective, it has been very rewarding to see the turkey community realize there is a problem with turkey populations and begin actively searching for solutions. Turkey hunters are a passionate group, and I believe they are willing to swallow any pill to ensure wild turkeys are thriving and at a minimum, populations are stable.

I ask you to consider supporting the efforts of so many in the effort to ensure wild turkeys do not go the way of the bobwhite quail. If hunters don't do this who will? If not you, who?

If you want to help Dr. Lashley and his work at the University of Florida go to:
<http://UFgive.to/UFGameLab>

To listen and learn from the Wild Turkey Science Podcast go to: **https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC6wRSurdGKwaG_cb8HoVyAAz0oGIVMUA**

If you would like to join TFT or start a flock in your area go to:**<https://turkeysfortomorrow.org/>**

Crappie in Private Lakes

By Scott Brown



The crappie is one of the best eating freshwater fish, but care must be taken when introducing them into your private waterbody. Not all waterbodies can support a quality crappie population, and mismanagement can ruin your already quality fishery.

Many lake owners ask about improving their crappie fishery or creating one in a lake they are not currently in. In my opinion, nothing is finer than eating fried crappie. Minnows or small jigs with ultralight tackle make for some exciting fishing for both experienced and novice anglers. Sometimes a crappie population is easily created and/or maintained, but in other situations it's a disaster or not recommended in the first place. Crappie require a larger waterbody and, in some situations, (small waterbodies) different forage than other predator species, such as the largemouth bass. A few small pond

owners questioned me for my caution regarding crappie in small ponds and said their small crappie pond has been quite successful and my response is to enjoy it, because once they are there, it takes drastic measures to get them out.

Description, History and Habits

There are two species of crappie, the **black** (*Pomoxis nigromaculatus*) and **white** (*Pomoxis annularis*). I have also heard them called White Perch, Calico Bass, Papermouth, Speckled-Perch, Speck and Sac-a-lait. They are members of the sunfish family and the largest of the

Scott Brown is a Biologist and regular contributor to Wildlife Trends Journal with over 35 years experience in research and managing natural resources throughout the Southeast. Scott founded Southern Sportsman Aquatics & Land Management in 2007 and now has clients from Texas to Florida and into the Carolinas. Contact him at tazmanlabs1@gmail.com or 336-941-9056.

species lumped together and known as the panfish.

The black crappie is native to most of the eastern half of the U.S. but has been stocked throughout and extensively transplanted that today it almost entirely blankets the U.S. and reaches up into southern Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, Canada. It is only noticeably scarce in an area of the Midwest stretching from western Texas up through Nevada, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho and western Montana, and even these states have black crappie either along their borders or in limited internal areas. The black crappie is deep bodied, silvery-green in color with possibly some yellow, with black blotches randomly throughout the body. The dorsal fin has 7 - 8 spines. They will commonly reach lengths of 9 - 14 inches, with the world record set in 2006, from a private lake in Missouri, weighing 5.0 lbs. Depending on where you are located, they live between 4 - 6 years, but have been documented up to 9 years old. During the

spawning season males and females look similar. Like other sunfish, they are nest builders and usually spawn in water temperatures between 55-68° F depending on where in the country you are located. This can happen between February and April based on how far North you are located. In the Southeast, crappie are usually the first nest spawning fish you will see along the shoreline. Although most of the year this species lives and feeds in open water in schools, during spawning season they move near shore in water 3 - 8 feet deep, near vegetation and fan a nest 8 - 15 inches in diameter. Females will lay between 10,000 and 180,000 eggs. This is why this species is hard to manage in small waterbodies. Eggs hatch in 3 - 5 days, guarded by the male and continues to stay with the newly hatched fry 2 - 3 more days until they leave the nest. Newly hatched black crappie feed on the egg yolk sack, then zooplankton (microscopic animals), insects and small fish. After about age two, they feed almost exclu-

sively on small fish and occasionally large insects.

The white crappie is native to the eastern half of the U.S. and southern Ontario west of the Appalachians. This species has also been introduced throughout the continental United States. It is missing from most of peninsular Florida and from some north, central and Midwestern states. The white crappie is more silver with green vertical bars and a greenish back. The dorsal fin has 5 - 6 dorsal fin rays. Their size is slightly longer, but not as heavy as black crappie. The white crappie world record was caught in 1957 from a public lake in Mississippi, weighing 5.3 lbs. White crappie spawn when water temperatures are between 57 - 70° F depending on location. Females produce 2,900 to 91,700 eggs when they nest. Both species will only nest once per year. Both species have a prolific reproduction rate and in small waterbodies usually become stunted with lack of proper forage for adult fish. They reach about four inches total



If you currently have a stunted overpopulated largemouth bass fishery, do not stock crappie, it will only make the forage shortage worse. This is a typical largemouth bass from a stunted population.

length after the first 12 months. Both species sexually mature at age 2 – 3.

Management

If you have crappie in your lake, whether it is small or large, you have to deal with them. If you do not yet have them, do not make an uneducated decision regarding introducing them into your waterbody. The old rule was if your lake is under 25 acres do not stock crappie, but that has changed over the years as more and more people have successfully stocked in smaller lakes, but for every success story there are several stories of failure in small lakes. We assess the lake size, physical traits, habitat, water chemistry and forage available or that can be introduced (stocked) before any decisions are made. I have never seen a quality crappie population in a waterbody less than five acres. I have successfully managed both public and private five-acre lakes with quality black crappie populations. But again, that is not the norm.

Crappie spend most of their adult life in open, deeper water, in schools, feeding on small schooling fish such as juvenile gizzard shad, threadfin shad and silversides (glass minnows). We have seen them thrive in a small waterbody on juvenile (small) golden shiners and fathead minnows, which does not fit the typical forage base criteria. A mixture of two or three of the above-mentioned forage species seems to work best in any size waterbody in keeping a sustainable crappie population. I believe as one forage base dwindles, they switch food sources, allowing the depleted one to rebound while the crappie target another. Without an abundant food source, they will not survive and will not reach their growth potential.

In small ponds, crappie will compete with largemouth bass for food. Removing all small bass and crappie when caught to allow more forage to be available for the bass and crappie that remain is required, if quality bass and crappie is the goal. This also promotes numbers of quality bass in the future and helps both species. Small bass and large crappie have the same size mouths; hence they look for the same size forage whether near shore or out in open water. Once largemouth bass reach 18 inches, they will be targeting larger forage too big for big crappie and possibly different species like bream, which crappie do not target as much.

Another fact regarding crappie is that they are cyclic. One or two years you may have a great crappie fishery, then a few years later it is considered average or poor, but rebounds again in a three-to-four years to quality status. This holds true in both large open systems and small closed ponds. This fluctuation goes up and down as the forage base improves and declines but

usually takes longer in larger waterbodies than smaller ones. For example, a 2,500-acre lake may take 5 – 7 years from good year to good year, while we have seen in 5 – 25 acre lakes maybe 3 – 4 years from good year to good year.

Preferred habitat for adult crappie is a shoreline with vegetation close to spawning with a sandy or gravel substrate, although they will also nest on mud or clay, but not as successful. Deeper open water with woody snag, either standing timber or underwater brush piles (or artificial fish attractors) are desired for hiding and feeding around where they spend most of their adult life. It has been my experience where both crappie species are present when not the spawning season, the white prefer brushy areas and black more open water. Brush and vegetation both provide surfaces for invertebrates and zooplankton to live, which feeds and grows small crappie. Adding offshore natural brush or artificial materials creating “brush piles” to harbor some and to fish around is advised.



Mosquitofish can play an important role for carrying juvenile crappie and bass into adulthood, giving them a high protein diet for accelerated growth rates early in life.



Open water fish, such as brook silversides and taillight shiners (glass minnows) are an excellent food source for crappie. These occur in the wild and are not offered by any hatcheries. If you have them, consider yourself lucky. They will aid you in creating a quality crappie fishery.

In the Southeast, most stock black crappie and as you move north, landowners have the luxury of either species. Now you can obtain a white/black cross (some refer to as a **black nose crappie**), which does not spawn as prolific and helps with overpopulation, and a few other crossing combinations with various claims on why they are better. I recommend starting in the middle or lower end of the recommended stocking rate that range from 50-100 per acre. If the forage is there, numbers will quickly come up and growth rates will be better if lower stocking rates are used. As opposed to stocking more, and growth rates being slower and depleting the forage base too quickly before quality size is reached. If creating a crappie only pond, stocking rates have been recommended as high as 200 per acre where sufficient forage is available, but again I recommend lowering that number and maximizing the growth rates from the first-year class. Do not think bass will keep

the crappie numbers down, especially if there is other, easier to catch forage is available. Crappie are faster swimmers than other bass forage present. Angler removal will still be required.

Fishing and Preparing for Table Fare

Crappie fishing is vastly different all over the country. Some successful anglers use cane poles with minnows over brush piles in frigid fall and winter temperatures, while others drift across open water in spring, summer and fall with small jigs or minnows and load the cooler. Each waterbody and region has its own successful crappie fishing techniques. You will figure out your most successful technique as you fish more and more. Different techniques will be better than others depending on the time of year. A small (1/32 to 1/16 ounce) jig with colored rubber tail or minnow attached through the lip works well. A #4 hook, with a minnow hooked through the back,

split shot and bobber also works well in certain lakes. With a slight breeze or use of trolling motor, I like to drift across a lake with a few minnows or jigs out at various depths to locate the depth they are at and see their bait preference, then concentrate on what works and where. Just before dark, crappie can be spotted feeding at the surface either on shad or silversides. Casting into the school with a small jig and rubber tail and reeling back in at moderate speed will fill a cooler in minutes when conditions are right. During the spring spawn, dropping minnows along the vegetative edge will catch some of the largest crappie in the lake.

Everyone has their own idea of what a harvestable size crappie is. Since they are highly successful at reproducing, overharvest in smaller waterbodies should not be a concern. Some like anything over 8 or 10 inches, and some want the “slabs” of 14-16 inches. You will learn about the crappie size structure in your pond as time goes on and be able to figure out at what size they will max out. If this is your situation, do not wait for 14-inches when 8, 10 or 12 inches may be as big as they will get in your area or waterbody. As you harvest, the average size should go up if you’re harvesting enough.

I am a traditionalist, nothing beats a scaled, gutted and headed crappie, dipped in egg and cornmeal, then fried in a cast iron skillet or deep fried until the fins are crispy served with hush puppies, baked beans and coleslaw. The larger crappie “The Slab” can be filleted and fried, baked or broiled. Many also enjoy a whole large crappie scaled and baked in foil with butter, lemon and seasoning.

The lesson is just because you want them, does not mean you should get them. Do your homework, be



Small threadfin shad are another crappie favorite food. But once they get too big crappie cannot consume them, but the bigger largemouth bass utilizes them.



Crappie eat golden shiners too, but the five-inch fish in this photo are already too large for even big crappie, but again, they become largemouth bass forage for the bigger individuals.

honest with yourself. Your pond may be able to grow nice crappie, but many small ponds cannot. Consult a trusted professional pond manager that does not tell you what you want to hear but gathers facts and makes an educated recommendation from the data available. It is better to evaluate and know your limitations than make a costly mistake and have to get the rotenone (fish poison) out and start your pond over.



This chunk largemouth bass is from a 14-acre lake with quality (15 inch) black crappie. It has been balanced through forage stocking and smaller bass and crappie removal.

This black crappie is on the small size but removing it and several hundred per year like it leaves more food for the remaining individuals. Both small crappie and small largemouth bass need to be removed to help those species achieve their maximum growth rates and you to achieve your management goals.



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Balancing Deer Density for Healthier Herds and Better Hunting

By Dave Edwards



“**W**e want to grow big bucks, and we want to see a lot of deer!” I can’t count how many times I’ve heard this phrase when meeting with new clients to discuss their deer management goals. It’s almost a universal sentiment among hunters and landowners: they want the thrill of frequent deer sightings and the bragging rights of harvesting many mature, trophy-quality bucks. While these two goals sound reasonable, they often sit at opposite ends of the spectrum. Achieving one can make the other more difficult. That’s where a deeper understanding of deer density and carrying capacity comes into play. When I explain to

clients that their two goals are in conflict, the conversation usually shifts into a discussion about the biological realities of deer populations — and how the best management strategy often lies in striking a delicate balance between the two. The challenge is this: how do we keep enough deer on the property to make hunting exciting, while also ensuring that those deer have the resources they need to be healthy, productive, and capable of growing large antlers? Unfortunately, in their desire to “see plenty of deer,” many hunters unintentionally sabotage their own long-term goals. They ease up on

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One of the biggest challenges in deer management isn’t biological - it’s psychological. Many hunters equate seeing more deer with better hunting, but this isn’t always the case.

harvest targets too early, allowing the population to creep upward again, which can lead to a cycle of fluctuating herd health — almost like a biological roller coaster.

To help you make the most of your deer management efforts, let’s explore why deer density matters, the science behind carrying capacity, the common pitfalls hunters fall into, and the practical steps you can take to keep your deer herd healthy year after year.

Why Deer Density Matters

White-tailed deer are what biologists refer to as density-dependent

animals. In simple terms, the size and health of a deer population are directly influenced by how many deer occupy a given area. At a **HIGH** deer density - resources become scarce, competition increases, and the health of individual deer declines. Antler size may decrease, average body weights drop, fawn survival decreases, and diseases can spread more easily. At a **LOW** deer density - more resources per deer lead to better body condition, higher reproductive success, increased fawn survival, and greater potential for antler development. As deer managers, we're constantly trying to balance these two forces — maintaining enough deer to provide quality hunting experiences without crossing the threshold where the land can no longer support them. This is where collecting as much information about the deer population, deer health, and hunting quality plays a critical role in assessing the status of the herd and hunting to make informed management decisions. You can't manage what you don't measure.

The Role of Data Collection

When it comes to managing a deer herd effectively to achieve specific goals, some of the most useful information you can gather each year includes harvest data, reproductive data, and density indicators. Harvest data, such as age, weights, and antler measurements, provide insight into body condition and nutritional health for each sex and age class. Reproductive data, including lactation rates in harvested does and fetal measurements, reveal important details about reproductive success. Finally, density indicators—such as trail camera surveys, spotlight counts, and hunter observation logs—help estimate deer numbers and buck-to-doe ratios. When you collect

these metrics year after year, patterns or trends start to emerge. You'll see how changes in habitat quality, food availability, and harvest strategies influence deer numbers and herd health. This information allows you to make data-driven harvest decisions instead of relying on guesswork.

Understanding Carrying Capacity

The term carrying capacity is central to wildlife management. It refers to the maximum number of healthy animals that a given habitat can support at its lowest point in resource availability — typically late winter or during prolonged drought. This “lowest point” is important. A property might seem capable of supporting more deer when crops are standing, mast crops are abundant, or food plots are lush in the summer. But those food sources are temporary. When they disappear, the habitat may only be able to support a fraction of the population.

If you've ever visited a property with an overpopulated deer herd such as an urban neighborhood or state park where hunting is prohibited, you've probably seen the consequences of exceeding carrying capacity:

- Overbrowsed vegetation and bare understory.
- Thin, unhealthy deer with low body weights.

- Reduced fawn survival and delayed breeding.
- Habitat degradation that takes years to recover.

These populations often follow a boom-and-bust cycle. The population grows unchecked until food and cover run out. As resources become scarce, health declines rapidly, reproduction slows, and mortality rises. Eventually, the population crashes due to starvation, disease, or both. Once the population drops, the habitat begins to recover, and the cycle repeats. Even if the population never crashes dramatically, living near the upper limit of carrying capacity keeps deer in a constant state of nutritional and social stress. That's not good for herd health, antler growth, or hunting quality.



How Habitat Management Influences Capacity

The good news is that carrying capacity isn't fixed — it can be improved through effective, well-planned habitat management practices. By increasing both the quantity and quality of available food and cover, you can support a healthier herd at a slightly higher density without sacrificing body condition or antler size.

Some of the most effective habitat management strategies for deer include timber management, prescribed burning, food plots, and native vegetation management. Timber management practices such as selective thinning and clearcutting can increase sunlight penetra-

tion, which stimulates understory growth that provides prime forage and cover. This practice not only benefits deer but also enhances overall forest health by promoting a more diverse plant community and reducing competition among trees. Prescribed burning, when implemented consistently, resets understory succession and encourages the growth of fresh, nutrient-rich vegetation that benefits deer and a wide range of other wildlife species. Controlled fire also helps reduce fuel loads, lowering the risk of destructive wildfires, while creating a mosaic of habitats at different stages of regrowth that deer use for feeding, budding and escape cover.

Establishing diverse, year-round food plots ensures that deer have access to consistent nutrition during critical times, such as late winter and summer stress periods, when natural forage may be limited. By planting a mix of annual and perennial species, managers can provide a steady supply of carbohydrates, protein, and minerals that support body condition, antler growth, and reproductive success. Finally, managing native vegetation with selective herbicides promotes the growth of preferred, high-quality native forbs, shrubs, and mast-producing trees, improving both food availability and cover. This strategy encourages plant diversity, enhances edge habitat, and creates conditions that attract deer while also supporting pollinators and other wildlife.

When done well, habitat management can stabilize food availability throughout the year, reducing the natural “feast or famine” effect that often occurs in wild systems. It also improves the carrying capacity of the land, allowing it to support healthier deer populations over the long term. Importantly, these practices not only benefit deer but also create a more balanced ecosystem, where soil health, plant diversity, and wildlife communities all thrive together.

Avoiding the “Roller Coaster” Effect

Many well-meaning hunters run into trouble when they react to declining antler quality or poor body condition by suddenly increasing harvest, particularly of does. The following year, with fewer deer competing for limited resources, the herd rebounds — body weights rise, racks improve, and fawn production and survival increases. Feeling satisfied that the problem has been “solved,” hunters often ease up on harvest pressure,



either out of concern for overharvesting or simply to see more deer. Within a year or two, the population rebounds past the optimal level, resources become strained again, and herd quality begins to decline. The response is to ramp up harvest once more, creating a repeating cycle. This boom-and-bust approach leads to unnecessary fluctuations in both herd health and antler quality.

A better approach is a consistent, data-driven harvest. On properties where harvest targets are established and maintained each year based on solid data, herd health tends to remain stable or improve steadily over time. The benefits are significant: fawns are rarely born into nutritionally stressed conditions, antler development is optimized from an earlier age, fawn recruitment rates remain high and predictable, and overall herd health stays consistently strong, avoiding the lows associated with population crashes. This steady, measured approach is what ultimately produces the ideal balance between seeing enough deer and growing high-quality bucks.

Finding Your Property's "Sweet Spot" Density

Every property has its own unique mix of soil quality, habitat types, habitat diversity, food sources, and hunting pressure, which means the ideal deer density can vary greatly from one property to the next, even just a few miles apart. The goal is to achieve a balance where deer have an abundance of food and cover throughout the year, antler size and body condition remain consistently strong, and hunters can regularly see deer... without deer placing undue stress on the habitat. Reaching this "sweet spot" requires ongoing monitoring and a willingness to adjust your harvest strategy as conditions and resources change.



An effective deer management strategy begins with establishing solid baseline data, which serves as the foundation for all future decisions. This process involves conducting trail camera surveys to estimate population size and structure, recording harvest data such as age, weight, and antler measurements, collecting hunter observation data to track trends in deer sightings, and documenting habitat quality to evaluate the land's ability to support healthy populations. Together, this information provides an accurate picture of herd health,

reproductive success, and available resources, helping managers avoid guesswork and base their decisions on measurable evidence.

Once baseline data is established, the next step is to set harvest goals for does and bucks that align with management objectives, whether those goals are focused on improving herd health, balancing sex ratios, or producing older age-class bucks. These goals should be flexible and responsive to the data, rather than fixed assumptions, as deer populations and habitat condi-

tions can vary from year to year. At the same time, implementing habitat improvements is essential for increasing carrying capacity and ensuring long-term success. Efforts such as enhancing natural vegetation, planting diverse food plots, and providing supplemental feed when appropriate can reduce nutritional stress, boost body condition, and support fawn recruitment.

Monitoring progress is a continual process and should be built into the management plan. Repeating surveys annually allows land managers to track key indicators such as body weights, antler size, fawn recruitment rates, and changes in habitat conditions. This repeated measurement not only reveals the effectiveness of current strategies but also highlights areas that need adjustment. Based on this feedback, harvest levels can be fine-tuned—if health indicators begin to decline, increasing harvest pressure can prevent overpopulation and resource depletion; if indicators remain stable or improve, managers can maintain current harvest levels with confidence.

Perhaps the most important factor in successful deer management is consistency. Too often, managers are tempted to reduce harvest prematurely, especially after seeing short-term gains in antler size or population numbers. However, resisting this temptation and sticking with a long-term strategy ensures that the herd remains stable, healthy, and sustainable well into the future. In short, effective deer management is not about quick fixes or one-season changes—it is about patience, data-driven decision-making, and a commitment to balancing the needs of both the herd and the habitat over time.



The Psychology of “Not Enough Deer”

One of the biggest challenges in deer management isn’t biological—it’s psychological. Many hunters equate seeing more deer with better hunting, but this isn’t always the case. A property with a balanced, healthy herd may not produce a dozen sightings on every hunt. However, the deer that are observed will often be in noticeably better condition and more likely to include mature, trophy-quality bucks. This is because true herd health depends on the relationship between population density, habitat quality, and nutrition—not simply on how many animals can be spotted from a stand. In fact, a property that consistently produces large numbers of deer sightings may actually be overpopulated, with animals competing for limited resources, resulting in lower body weights, reduced antler quality, and weaker fawn recruitment.

Successfully managing a herd requires discipline, patience, and trust in the data, even when it seems like there are “plenty” of deer to harvest. Relying on sound data such as harvest records, trail camera surveys, and habitat evaluations allows managers to make

informed decisions that benefit the herd over the long term rather than chasing short-term satisfaction. It also requires shifting the mindset from quantity to quality—valuing the overall health, balance, and age structure of the herd instead of focusing solely on the number of deer seen during a hunt. This can be difficult for hunters who are used to equating success with frequent encounters, but those who embrace a more disciplined approach often find that the quality of their hunting experience improves dramatically.

Ultimately, overcoming the psychological barrier is about recognizing that fewer, healthier deer are far more valuable than an overabundance of stressed, undernourished animals. By relying on data instead of perception, hunters and land managers can build healthier herds, maintain productive habitats, and ensure consistent opportunities to harvest mature bucks season after season.

Final Thoughts

Deer density and carrying capacity aren’t just abstract scientific terms—they’re the backbone of successful deer management. Understanding how they interact



Most hunters want to grow big bucks and see lots of deer. Unfortunately, having both is often not realistic or possible.

can mean the difference between a herd that's constantly riding the roller coaster of boom and bust, and one that produces consistently healthy deer and high-quality hunting experiences.

The key takeaway is simple: maintain deer density well within your property's carrying capacity by taking an adequate number of deer each year, and combine that with sound habitat management. Do this consistently, along with managing hunting pressure, and you'll experience quality hunting year after year. Those that know me, have heard me say this many times.... Consistent exceptional hunting does not happen by accident.





Quick Tips for Year-Round Habitat Improvement

- Include adequate acreage of spring/summer and fall/winter food plot plantings to ensure nutrition throughout the year.
- Use prescribed burns or selective timber harvest to promote increased food and cover.
- Plant mast-producing trees like oaks, chestnuts, and persimmons.
- Control invasive species to let high-quality native plants thrive.
- Utilize selective herbicides to promote wildlife friendly understory communities

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Wildlife Trends Journal Management Calendar

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Install honeysuckle management units for additional quality browse

Due to its non-native status and hardiness, the debate on whether managing honeysuckle for wildlife should be promoted or discouraged will be forever ongoing. It currently is known to exist to a varying degree in every state. Honeysuckle is a highly preferred,

practically year-round food source for deer, containing 9- 16% protein. As such, managed honeysuckle patches can provide additional quality food for deer and other wildlife. Management of honeysuckle patches is easy – fertilize to increase growth and nutritional value, keep competition down by removing undesirable weeds, and if possible “isolate” managed patches by mowing

Although biologists provide guidance on how many and which deer to harvest, hunters are the real deer managers. Harvesting deer is essential for properly managing population levels and associated herd characteristics.

around them. Mowing around the patch allows easy access for management activities (like spreading fertilizer, pruning, or applying herbicide). This also provides easy access for wildlife. If you have ample honeysuckle patches on your property, select a few to concentrate your management efforts on. Pick patches that receive plenty of sunlight and manage the same



Managing patches of honeysuckle can provide additional quality food for deer and other wildlife.

Flood duck ponds to “full pool” by early to mid-November.

Monitor water levels in duck ponds as fall arrives. Many areas in the Southeast have been fortunate and have gotten abundant rainfall so far. However, too much water too early can be bad for actively growing duck pond crops/plants. Water control structures allow managers to regulate water levels and are valuable tools when a rain event such as a tropical storm comes through. Once your crop matures, allow ponds to slowly flood

to “full pool” as November approaches. Ideal water depths for dabbling ducks such as mallards, gadwalls, wood ducks, etc. is 12-18” with pockets of 4”-6” depths. The reason to have ponds flooded 2-4 weeks before the hunting season opens is to give ducks a chance to find your ponds and get used to using them. Flooding too early (more than a month before the season) may result in seed deterioration resulting in less food later during the late season. For consistent good hunting throughout the season, avoid over-hunting your duck pond and allow a “rest” period between hunts. If you have several duck ponds, consider a staggered approach to flooding the ponds. That is, flood some the ponds early, then flood other ponds 2-4 weeks later. Depending on your particular situation, using this strategy could concentrate duck activity which would enhance hunting. Staggered flooding also ensures that

patches throughout the year and annually. Ideally, these patches will be in locations that will provide hunting opportunities such as near food plots, fields, and/or hunting stands. Some landowners create honeysuckle patches within their food plots by planting a staggered line of 1-gallon containerized honeysuckle plants. One trick that I often recommend is to create a wire fence tent to place over the patch. Because of the added fertilizer and care, these patches are very palatable, and deer will literally eat the plants to the ground. The wire tent only allows deer to eat portions of the honeysuckle that grow outside of the “tent” which saves the plant. Make sure to use wire fence with a small enough mesh to prevent deer from being able to eat inside the tent (~ 3” fencing works well).



Leaving areas of standing corn with strategically mowed lanes through it is a proven successful method for observing and harvesting mature bucks.

food is available to ducks for a longer period. Keep in mind that managed duck ponds not only provide hunting opportunities, but also provides a significant and valuable food source for migrating waterfowl. It is also a good idea to designate some ponds as a “no hunt area” to provide a place for ducks to loaf. This will keep them on your property.

Utilize standing corn to enhance deer hunting experiences.

Although I rarely recommend planting corn for feeding deer (except in the north), it can provide great “cover” value for deer in the winter and creating exceptional hunting opportunities. Regarding planting corn for feeding deer in the Southeast, it’s simply not worth the farming time and effort when you can get more for your money out of a 50-pound bag of whole corn from the feed store (or even Walmart now days!). However, planting corn to create exceptional hunting set ups is a different story. If you have corn planted on your property, particularly larger agricultural fields, strategically leave some standing for deer. Standing dead corn is not only attractive to deer from a food standpoint but the cover it creates provides great travel corridors to connect woodlots or mature timber. In some situations, deer will “funnel” through mature woods to enter the standing corn as their travel path. This can make for some fun hunting in the mature woods near the corn. Mowing a wagon wheel pattern or hub & spoke design in the corn also makes for great hunting. This strategy is nothing more than mowing 8-10 ft wide strips through the corn as spokes that radiate out away from the hunting stand (hub). Depending on the skill level of hunters using the property, particularly guests that may hunt the spot, I often only

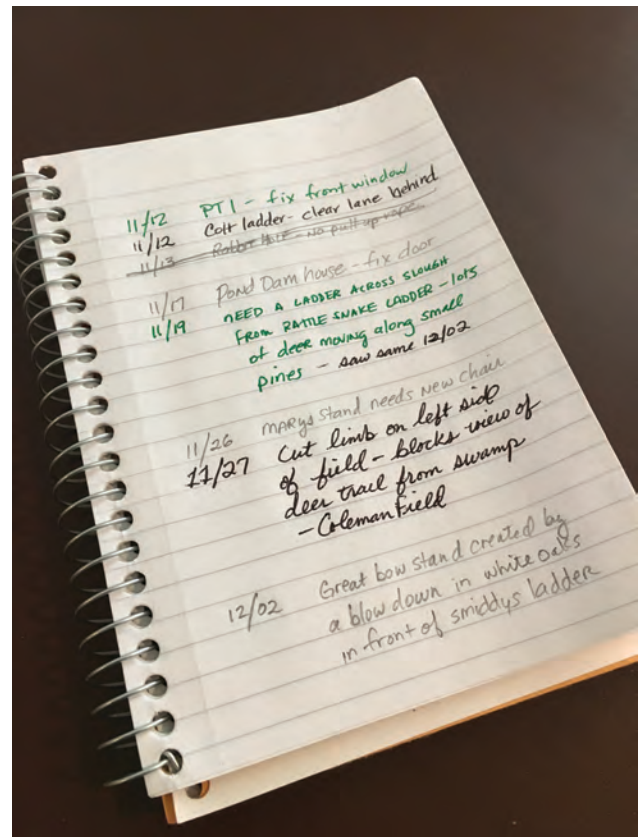
mow spokes out to 125 yards from the stand. However, if the situation allows and hunters are skilled, spokes can be mowed out to 300 yards. The resulting spokes can either be left as is to simply provide shooting lanes through the standing corn or planted in fall food plot crops – or a combo of these. This set up is particularly successful during the rut and/or on cold mornings. Standing dead corn also provides great winter habitat for quail and turkeys. Leaving a border of standing corn around a field provides valuable wildlife habitat and creates a soft edge along abrupt woodlines.

Conduct pre-season projects that will help reduce or minimize deer hunting pressure and disturbance.

Hunting pressure and disturbance can significantly influence the quality of hunting and the number of deer—especially mature bucks—that hunters see on a property. From years of collecting thousands of hunter observations, one trend is clear: the more pressure applied, the fewer deer are observed. Reducing disturbance is essential for consistent, high-quality hunting. Here are several proven strategies:

1. Smart Stand Placement

Position stands near food plots so hunters can enter and exit without spooking deer already in the field.



Taking notes throughout the season is a great way to capture improvements needed that will improve hunting experiences and success.

This often means setting stands slightly inside the woods and/or planting a visual “screen” to conceal movement. Temporary screens can be created with summer crops like corn, Egyptian wheat, or sorghum sudan. For longer-term solutions, consider switchgrass, evergreen shrubs, or conifers such as pines or cedars. Even leaving a strip of a food plot fallow for a couple of years can generate effective natural cover. Once stands are in place, cut narrow shooting lanes to provide clear visibility into the field without overexposing the stand/hunters.

2. Eliminate Stand Noise

Safety checks are important, but so is soundproofing. Inspect stands for creaks, squeaks, and rattles. Oil squeaky chairs, tighten ladder bolts, and quiet windows or doors. Even minor noises can alert deer and



Maintaining clean sneak trails is a proven strategy for getting hunters to and from stands with minimal disturbance to deer.

negatively affect both the current and future hunts.

3. Quiet Access Routes

Create and maintain “sneak trails” that allow hunters to approach and leave stands with minimal noise. Clear debris, trim obstacles, and, if necessary, rake or blow leaves to keep paths silent throughout the season. Ideally, sneak trails should be bare dirt which allows hunters to silently slip in and out of stands.

4. Hunt with the Wind

Every stand has favorable wind directions that carry scent away from where deer will approach or travel. Hunt them only when the wind is right...period! At my camp, we maintain a list of stands and which winds they can be hunted, check the forecast daily (sometimes hourly), and select stands accord-

ingly. If we get to a stand and the wind changes to an unfavorable direction or starts flip flopping, we leave. This discipline dramatically reduces pressure.

5. Limit Road Traffic

Review your property map and identify roads that may disturb deer activity. Close unnecessary roads before and during hunting season, and only use them when absolutely needed. This helps minimize disturbance into key areas.

Ultimately, beyond herd management itself, the most important factor in creating high-quality hunting experiences is minimizing hunting pressure. For more in-depth strategies on this topic, see “Steady Under Pressure” in *Wildlife Trends*.

Keep notes from deer hunting experiences.

One thing I’ve learned working with landowners/hunters across the country is that the consistently successful deer hunters keep good notes and apply what they have observed to enhance future hunting experiences. Whether they keep a personal journal of hunting observations or formally fill out hunter observation cards, they have records to reflect on and analyze after the season to help make adjustments to hunting strategies and stand management. That is, observations made this season help these hunters prepare for a successful season next year. Keeping notes is particularly useful on properties with multiple hunters where some of the seemingly less important information may not be shared around the fire at night, but when combined with other observations at the end of the season may provide great insights for adjusting a setup for more successful hunts. An example of a seemingly unimportant observation may be “bumped 3 deer in oaks on the way in”. If this was observed by only one hunter on one hunt, it may not be meaningful. However, if “bumping deer” was noted on 6 hunts to this stand it deems further investigation. Should the access trail to this stand be moved to avoid bumping deer? Deer are there for a reason. Do we need a stand in the area we keep bumping deer? Another example may be that at a particular ladder stand many mature bucks were seen, but most bucks seemed to skirt the edge of a slough that was 150 yards to the west. Rather than writing this off as bad luck, this stand would be moved closer to the action with careful consideration of hunter access, winds required to hunt it, etc. Moving this stand may happen during the season or during post-season efforts depending on the

situation. Although deer movement varies, numerous hunter observations on a stand without much action calls for removing and relocating that stand.

Scout from the skinning shed

How many times have you found a great place on your property to hunt that had everything – great food sources, cover, maybe a few deer trails and rubs... set up a stand, sit there all day with anticipation and never see a deer? Or worse yet, have you ever convinced yourself that “this is the place, it’s just a matter of time” and spent a weekend committed to a single stand and not see much of anything? I have, and it isn’t much fun! Don’t get me wrong. I don’t have to kill a deer every time I go to the woods, but I certainly like to see some action. It was very likely that the area I was hunting was indeed a “good area” and had all the ingredients of a prime spot, but the deer simply weren’t using it at the time. It is also very likely that there were either abundant food sources or more preferred food sources available somewhere else on the property. Like me, deer are slaves to their stomachs (or rumens). They feed many times each day. Thus, food is what drives most deer movement. Deer movement results in successful hunts. The key is to know where deer are bedding or loafing, which food source they are using, and position yourself in a strategic location near the food source, bedding area, or between the two. This sounds easy, right? However, it is difficult when and if various food sources are available for deer.

Effectively scouting by traditional techniques is certainly necessary to consistently have successful hunts. However, traditional methods require a good bit of time and energy on your part, which for

most of us is limited. Besides the time required, traditional scouting techniques require the hunter to “ramble around” the woods disturbing deer and leaving a lot of scent behind. This is where scouting from the skinning shed comes in handy, will minimize “scouting pressure”, and can save precious time that can be spent on stand.

Scouting from the skinning shed simply refers to inspecting the rumen contents of harvested deer to determine available and preferred food sources that deer are using at that particular time of the season. “At that particular time” is important because food sources change from week to week. To do this, simply cut the rumen (stomach) open and look to see what’s inside. A word of caution: if the rumen is bloated or tight, release pressure slowly with the point of your knife before slicing....and turn your head or you may be inspecting your own stomach contents! Although the contents often look like a green gooey mess, with some inspection, the primary food sources the deer has been eating should be obvious. It helps to dump the contents on the ground or concrete pad and run some water over it. I keep a “scouting box” at the skinning shed that makes the job easier. The scouting box is nothing more than a wooden box with a hardware cloth bottom. This box allows you to dump the stomach contents onto the screen and wash away the more digested/fine particles leaving only the larger pieces behind. Stomach contents often include various leaves and acorns. Simply identifying what deer are eating will help you focus on specific areas of your property leading to more productive hunts.

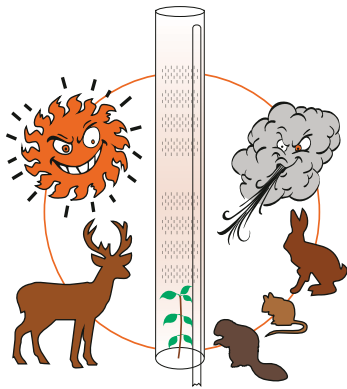
Harvest deer.

Although biologists provide guidance on how many and which deer

to harvest, hunters are the real deer managers. Remember that you are making a deer management decision each time you pull the trigger. In fact, not harvesting a deer is a management decision. Unfortunately, I see many landowners with goals of producing high-quality or trophy bucks that allow the deer herd to overpopulate because they like seeing 20+ deer when they go to a stand. This situation often results in a poor-quality deer herd with significant dispersal of deer to surrounding properties, less reproduction and fawn recruitment, and ultimately poor-quality antlers. If your goal is to manage for a quality or trophy deer herd, harvesting an adequate number of deer each year is essential to keep the deer herd and habitat healthy. In addition to maintaining a desirable deer density, harvest is the primary tool used to manage the adult sex ratio of a herd. Maintaining a balanced sex ratio will result in a much healthier deer herd, better quality bucks, increased fawn survival, and exciting hunting. Balancing the adult sex ratio is also one of the tools I use to increase breeding competition and get mature bucks on their feet so that my clients can see or harvest them (which is always more challenging than growing them!). When harvesting does, especially early in the season, make attempts to do so in a way that minimizes hunting pressure and preserves hunting quality on the property. Avoid harvesting lots of does on food plots before the rut if you plan to hunt the food plots for mature bucks later. There are always “low impact” options for taking does. Places such as woods stands, powerlines/gas lines, roads, or clearcuts are great choices.

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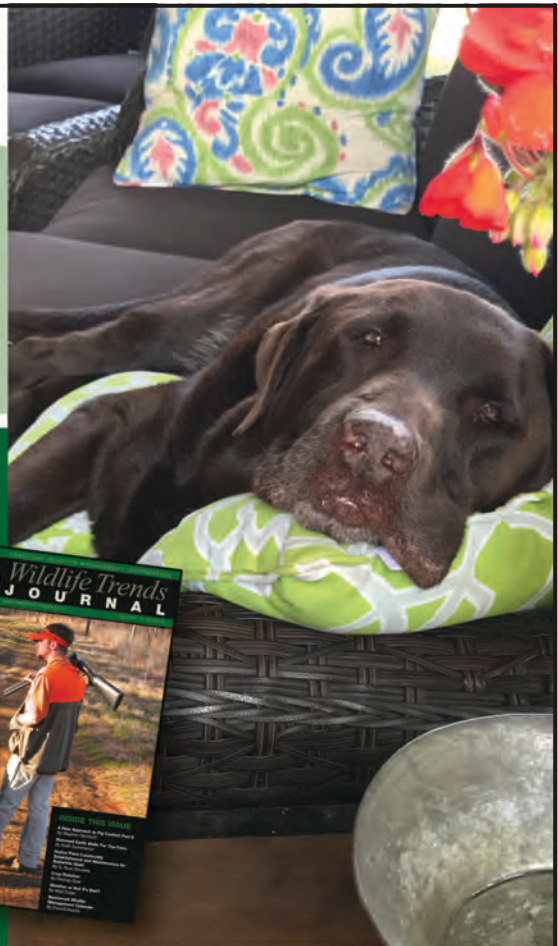
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