

Didn't see a deer this season? Wonder why

By Rich Strohm

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Since the introduction of earn-a-buck deer seasons, I have questioned the Department of Natural Resources' deer herd population estimate. The time has come for hunters to take control of the future of deer hunting in Wisconsin, or the deer hunt as we know it will be lost for future generations.

I am not a biologist or wildlife specialist, such as those making decisions in the DNR. But I have 34 years of experience gun hunting deer and 32 years bow hunting deer in Wisconsin. I have owned land near Black River Falls and near Richland Center, hunted on public land in Iron and Vilas counties and hunted on private land in Marquette, Walworth and Kenosha counties. I have harvested more than 50 deer and regularly talk with those who hunt in various parts of the state, many with as much or more experience than me.

My belief as well as that of others is that the DNR overestimates the size of the deer herd in Wisconsin.

When I've raised this concern in the past, I've been told that I may know my own little property but that the DNR has a much better handle on statewide data. In fact, in an April 29 article on the agency's Web site, DNR big game biologist Keith Warnke stated: "The deer population remains at record levels."

The DNR recently conducted a comprehensive study of Wisconsin's black bear population. Black bears have a range of approximately one-third that of whitetail deer in Wisconsin and a much smaller population. Presumably, this would lead to a more accurate population estimate. The DNR now concludes the bear population is likely more than two times larger than previously thought!

Now, if estimating the number of bears can be off by more than 100%, is it unreasonable to believe that the deer estimates could be way off as well? Other hunters and I reached this conclusion years ago.

The 2008 gun deer hunt saw a 20% drop from last year in the number of deer harvested despite ideal conditions, including snow cover in the north. Oneida County had a 46% drop in antlerless deer harvested and a 49% drop in bucks harvested. Vilas County had a reduction of 53% in antlerless deer and a 34% reduction in bucks harvested.

The DNR likely will point to some areas having a comparable harvest to last year. If a hunting party typically sees 40 deer and harvests three but saw five this year and harvested three, yes, the harvest numbers are the same. But how did the quality of the hunt compare?

DNR wildlife managers say that years of earn-a-buck seasons and herd-reduction seasons seem to be working. Warnke said in a recent news release: "Hunters have been doing a good job, and deer populations may be moving toward healthy goals. Their commitment and involvement are having a positive effect and will help to ensure a healthy deer herd in the future for them and for a younger generation of hunters who are coming up through the ranks."

Moving toward healthy goals? Many hunters didn't see one deer this season, and that is the DNR's idea of healthy goals? I am trying to keep my two sons, ages 12 and 15, interested in deer hunting. But not even seeing deer is a path to losing the future generations of hunters.

What motivation would the DNR have in overestimating the deer population? I can point to several possible motives. The DNR relies on license sales for revenue. Greater population forecasts may lead to greater optimism and more people buying licenses. With a greater estimate, the DNR can justify a greater harvest of antlerless deer through earn-a-buck seasons and antlerless-only seasons. (The Natural Resources Board this week denied a group's request to suspend the antlerless deer hunt, planned statewide from Thursday to Sunday.)

DNR Secretary Matt Frank has said repeatedly that he wants to ban baiting and feeding of deer because that contributes to higher deer populations, which threaten the regeneration of forests and, in turn, the state's forest-based industries, and it leads to more car-deer collisions. Well, I guess my sons will have to learn to appreciate the forest undergrowth instead of seeing deer when hunting.

In summary, I believe the DNR has used the chronic wasting disease issue and overestimates of the deer herd to reduce the actual size of the deer herd to modern-day low levels. This is an effort to pacify other

interests, such as the insurance industry, agriculture industry and forest industry, while misleading those of us who hunt and vacation in Wisconsin.

We need to take measures now to increase the deer herd by stopping antlerless deer hunts and earn-a-buck requirements. If we don't, we will lose not only the economic benefit deer hunting brings to Wisconsin but a great tradition for future generations.

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