

Antlerless Deer Seasons

by Larry Castle, Wildlife Biologist

Lately, some deer hunters have been asking, "When are the doe seasons going to end?" Deer hunters in Mississippi have been enjoying antlerless hunting opportunities for almost a decade. The majority of hunters and landowners are pleased with their freedom to harvest deer of either-sex while hunting. Deer populations in most locations can now be correctly managed for the first time in the history of deer management in Mississippi.

However, some hunters still believe that our antlerless seasons are the reasons for their declining deer harvest and observation woes. These hunters accurately assess the deer population as being reduced from the high numbers of years past. Population reduction was an objective of the antlerless seasons and has been successful in some areas. But there is more.

Many hunters have assumed that the antlerless seasons would become more restricted or even discontinued when deer populations were reduced. In addition, these hunters want the historically abnormally high deer population (with its out of proportion buck:doe ratios) to return. They expect to see deer population levels at unrealistically high numbers and will continue to compare every future year to some time in the past when deer numbers were too high and even harmful to the habitat.

Biologically, we believe that antlerless seasons should continue. If deer numbers exist to justify buck hunting, then antlerless opportunity is warranted as well. In general, wildlife biologists believe it is best for the resource and the habitat to recommend either-sex opportunity on private lands, concurrent with any open deer season.

Besides either-sex deer seasons, there are other biological questions to consider. There are important decision makers in the process other than biologists. Consider this analogy.

A young child is sick. The anxious parents carry the child to the pediatrician. The experienced doctor has seen this type sickness and has made the same routine diagnosis hundreds of times.

A simple long-term series of injections will cure the child. The parents are relieved that their child will be fine. While in the doctor's office, the first injection is given, and, of course, the child cries.

Time for the second injection rolls around, and the parents drag the child into the doctor's office. At home, the child begins whining about the third injection. "Is it really necessary?" the child asks. "How long will I have to take these shots? Will they ever end?" the child cries.

The loving parents begin questioning the doctor. Could he be wrong? Could their child possibly be cured with fewer injections? Maybe the doctor could prescribe some pills, anything but the injections that make the child cry.

Antlerless seasons have similar players. The sickness is the unrealistically high deer population in need of antlerless harvest, and the injections are the antlerless seasons prescribed by the wildlife biologist.

What all hunters should remember is that setting Mississippi's deer seasons are never easy. Various hunting groups want different things, and there are many players in the deer hunting scenario.

Biologists justify their antlerless recommendations to the MDWFP executive director and the Commission on Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks after on-the-ground evaluations in their respective areas. But when it comes down to it, the executive director and the five-member Commission really take the heat on this issue.

Deer populations produce young at about a 50:50 buck to doe ratio. Herd stabilization demands removal at equal rates. When deer populations fall to unacceptable levels, culprits other than antlerless opportunity (e.g., poaching and disease) become limiting factors. As soon as any limiting factors are identified and removed, populations respond in increased numbers with the presence of antlerless seasons.

Over the years, we have made a lot of progress in deer management across Mississippi. We think this is partly due to a strong, determined group of decision makers. Mississippi hunters should be given high marks for working with the MDWFP in helping to make the time-honored tradition of deer hunting something special that we can hand down with pride to future generations of Mississippi sportsmen.

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