Illinois' successful county-based hunter and harvest management strategy is the envy of deer managers nationwide.

Illinois Deer Management

Story By Tom Micetich
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The March issue of *Outdoor*Illinois, with the annual "Big Buck" listing, generates considerable reader interest. There are those readers who anxiously await the article and scan the table looking for records in specific counties. Some read the article and question the validity of trophy hunting, others interpret the list as a need for controlling growing deer numbers in various locales around the state and a few even suggest there are not enough deer in Illinois.

Numerous firearm deer season adjustments since 1957 were in response to changing human and deer populations, available habitat and public attitudes.

Illinois' modern firearm deer season began in 1957, after being closed for more than 50 years, and we've come a long way since then. That first season, hunters applied for a limited number of either-sex permits in the 33 open counties, and harvested slightly more than 1,700 deer. During that first three-day season, most hunters took the first animal in range, doubtful a second deer would materialize.

By the late-1970s and early-1980s, hunters thought they had already "won" when an envelope arrived containing an

Significant deer-herd growth of the late-1980s resulted in programs designed to encourage the harvest of does.

either-sex deer permit. It didn't matter if they got a deer—the chance to hunt was the goal and getting a deer was a bonus.

In the mid-1980s, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) biologists noticed a shift in the number of hunters interested only in a buck hunt. Abundant deer made it easier to pass on does because, hopefully, a buck was yet to come. Hunters no longer asked if you got a deer—they asked if you got a buck.

The desire for a trophy buck wasn't new. Established in 1887, the Boone and Crockett Club developed a trophy recognition program designed to document the decline of big game species in North America. Joined in 1961 by the Pope and Young Club, these programs recognized the animal—not the hunter—and helped monitor the recovery of many species.

In Illinois, trophy deer is not DNR's primary goal, but a by-product of sound deer management practices and the state's high soil productivity which produces abundant, highly nutritious deer food.

During the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, the herd growth rate in many parts of Illinois became extremely high. The number of deer-vehicle collisions climbed, and landowners complained more frequently about deer-related crop damage. Such deer population growth could not be allowed to continue.

In an effort to stabilize population size, DNR exerted more harvest pressure, particularly on does, by issuing antlerless-only permits. This effort included a special, one-time issue deer harvest pin—"I took a doe so the herd won't grow"—which highlighted the rationale. Also implemented were a seventh day to the firearm season, a separate three-day muzzleloader-only season and the handgun (now Late-Winter) season. As a result, in certain parts of the state, doe harvest increased and population levels stabilized, while elsewhere the herd continued to grow, but at a slower rate.

DNR's objective was to stabilize popu-

Hunter access and a willingness to shoot female deer are critical to Illinois' deer management efforts.

lations in these still-growing areas as well. But, by the end of the 1990s, buck-only hunters were beginning to pass not only on does, but on smaller bucks as well.

In 1995, DNR implemented an over-the-counter (OTC) archery permit program to provide better service and increase the proportion of antlerless deer in the archery harvest. The availablity of antlerless-only permits would make the archery season a more useful management tool. DNR proposed a limit of two antlered deer, regardless of the type of permits a hunter had in their possession. No limit was placed on the number of OTC permits a hunter could purchase, only on the number of bucks harvested. This regulation fit DNR's goal of herd control, but added no additional hunting pressure on antlered deer.

Deer are a public resource residing on private land and hunting is the most effective population control tool in the manager's box. Deer management in Illinois is now, and always has been, a question of access to deer. Hunters must have access to the habitat if management efforts are to succeed—and hunters must be willing to shoot female deer.

County-wide annual population fluctuations can occur and herd management effectiveness via deer hunting becomes more difficult as the percentage of non-vulnerable deer increases. Unequal distribution of hunters may cause declines when localized areas are harvested more intensively than others. Given the need for access to deer for proper control, residential and industrial development increases the proportion of the deer population off-limits to hunters. Municipal annexation ahead of this development often brings weapon restrictions, sometimes well before any construction begins. The closure of parks, nature preserves and private refuges also contributes to the problem.

Some properties remain open to hunters but landowners desiring to provide quality, trophy-only or buck-only hunting lowers hunter numbers from historic levels and make does more inaccessible. These under-hunted properties contribute significantly to DNR's deer population control effort problems.

Licensed hunting outfitter operations now involve more than 500,000 acres statewide—and this does not include lands in private hunting leases, an increasingly common practice used to secure hunting ground by small groups or individuals. Landowners leasing their land to outfitters or other individuals contribute to localized deer problems when operators under-hunt deer on the property. Individual efforts to "grow the herd" to increase client satisfaction may, at times, contribute to major, localized deer problems. Buck- or trophy-only deer hunting operations do nothing to control deer numbers. While management plans for these operations may call for harvesting a number of female deer, often they fall short of the mark. The targeted number of bucks is seldom missed, however.

Research programs using radio-collared deer provide biologists with information necessary to more fully understand herd population dynamics and habitat requirements.

Sound management dictates that adequate numbers of bucks and does be harvested in each county, annually. Currently, with the increased harvest of female deer, the sex ratios and age ratios have improved statewide. The statewide deer management goal is to reduce deer-vehicle collisions and other negative aspects of deer on the landscape—damage to agricultural crops, ornamentals, orchards and native plant life on nature preserves—by reducing deer through an emphasis on doe harvest during all available deer hunting seasons.

Hunters can no longer see themselves as only a recreationist, buck hunter or trophy hunter. To achieve the desired level of deer population control, Illinois hunters must continue to shoot does.

And because Illinois hunters have been taking female deer since 1957, they are in a much better position—and mind set—to help manage the state's herd.

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Deer data

How do biologists monitor the deer population? It is impossible to know exactly how many deer are in Illinois, but population trends are indicated in several ways.

- Mathematical population modeling.
- Deer-vehicle collision records.
- The number of Deer Removal Permits issued to landowners experiencing excessive damage to row crops, orchards, nurseries, vineyards, truck crops and other specialty crops.
- Annual spotlight surveys conducted since 1981.
- Annual bow hunter surveys.
- Deer browse transects in some nature preserves and parks.