# The Most Vital Element to Deer Management

Living in a technological age that changes on a daily basis, it's hard to believe that biologists cannot come up with a precise estimate of how many deer make up any particular population. This simple fact indicates just what a Herculean task it is to micro-manage a particular deer herd alone populations on a statewide basis. But even this fact does not deter biologists and wildlife managers from eagerly accepting the challenge the whitetail represents. The techniques employed to manage whitetails are as different as the habitat types these animals occupy.

The paramount question asked by deer advocates is "just what is the most important aspect to managing deer"? If I could answer this question, I would be far ahead of my colleagues, but that's not the case. The answer is extremely difficult and varies by one's goal or goals, which are impacted by geographical region, climate, and soil type. The production of quality-racked bucks has gained a lot of attention over the last ten years directing much attention on this subject.

The basic deer management formula, often called the "three-legged stool", is age, nutrition, and genetics. It's the holistic approach to deer management, but with a single one of them missing, the other two components are negatively impacted.

Unquestionably, the most obvious technique to employ as a manager or a deer hunter is conservation, allowing deer to age. Generally, deer have an adequate supply of forage, thus by simply allowing animals time to reach the older age classes, antler size will increase. The degree of increase in antler size remains limited because even though older deer develop larger antlers, optimum antler size is equally dependent on the nutritional value of the plants they consume along with their inherent genetic potential.

Thus it's irrelevant how old a deer is if it exists on subpar habitat regardless its age or genetic potential.

For example, bucks inhabiting the brush country of South Texas, referred to as the "golden triangle" are renowned for exhibiting exceptional antlers. These bucks are not a byproduct of high fences or any other magical ingredient. Historically, even prior to the development of whitetail management, exceptionally large antlers developed simply as a result of the right genetics complemented by a rich plant diversity limited only by climate and a strict trespass law that allowed bucks to reach their optimal antler-producing years. Thus with all three legs of the stool represented, exceptional results are represented by simply allowing deer to age.

Travel 90 miles north of this fabled chaparral region to the Edwards Plateau of Texas and bucks in older age classes exist, but antler size cannot mimic that of their southern cohorts. Why? The habitat in the hill country is not as diverse nor nutritionally strong as the vegetative component in the golden triangle "one leg is missing" and the stool leans.

So what is the most vital ingredient to deer management if the three components seldom exist, which is most often the case. I believe it remains to be the habitat. Whenever we manage the habitat be it burning, disking, sculpting, etc., we impact not only deer but all inhabitants.

The driving force behind quality deer management is not the production of trophy Boone and Crockett bucks, but the realization of the highest quality animal that the particular landholding can produce. So if your area of concern is located on the southern coast of Mississippi where soils are poor, rain or any other ingredient will not sustain

antler growth comparable to deer located in the fertile delta region of northwest Mississippi. In other words, you can entertain a program where the vegetation is held in an earlier successional stage generally more palatable to deer, but the statistics of those deer derived from poor soils cannot and should not be expected to compare to those developed on highly fertile soils.

The point I am making is that the goal for a management area should be determined based on the realistic probability that it can be achieved.

It would be ludicrous if I suddenly acquired a sizable landholding in southern Florida and decided to manage Keys deer "the smallest of the 30 different subspecies of whitetails" with the goal of producing racks that naturally occur in the golden triangle of South Texas.

The point once again is to manage a deer herd so it can develop its maximum antler size based on the geographical region.

Fortunately, deer quality will always vary on a regional basis. This fact alone makes them unique. Sad would be the day when the cloning of deer is affordable and all one needs to do is decide when he or she would like to get one. That's right, one deer, because if antlers were all the same, why would anyone want more than one of them.

The uniqueness of antlers "no two are ever the same" is what makes whitetails so attractive to sportsmen. And face it, without the contingent of deer hunters we entertain across the U.S., many of us would be out of work. It's the sportsmen who must be happy when visiting our forest and brush lands, and I can assure you most have yet to see a mature buck alone harvest one regardless its size.

As a private lands wildlife biologist in Texas, I have had the opportunity to manage large racked bucks on open range that were only dreams of mine as a youngster growing up in the Keystone State. Privileged to take numerous Boone and Crockett whitetails has been a surreal opportunity, but none of the record class deer I have taken have ever eclipsed the excitement I realized when my first buck a yearling appeared among the hardwoods in the Appalachian Mountains not far from my home when I was 19 years old.

Reality is the most important issue wildlife managers must address. The fact that unbelievable racks develop in certain regions does not mean they can occur everywhere, particularly on a natural basis.

With unlimited funds, a silver bullet does exist, but it's by no means a natural occurring event. For example, the number of whitetail husbandry operations continues to increase. Today an individual can purchase a parcel of property construct a game proof fence around it where legal, and purchase all the big bucks desirable as long as feeders are provided to sustain them. This is unquestionably the closest thing to a silver bullet that I have witnessed in over 30 years, but it has some serious negative attributes as well. When such an endeavor is undertaken, local deer are subjected to diseases "one quite obvious is Chronic Wasting Disease."; the other, epizootic hemorrhagic disease. Along with this is the impact these often larger-bodied animals have on the habitat. And last but more importantly is the removal of the paramount ingredient to an outdoor hunting experience, and that is the anticipation or surprise as to what could show up when one is staged in that tree on a cold, brisk morning in the fall.

The fact is, any particular deer is a product of its environment regardless its genetic constitution. Thus it's the manager's responsibility to in some cases protect the habitat from abuse. In other instances, habitat improvement is required. The problem is all habitats, at least on a natural basis, are a byproduct of climate and sol type. The more we know about the environment the more we should understand the limitations on quality deer herds. Bottom line is, a 130-class deer at six years of age in one area is comparable to a 160-inch-class deer on another richer environment. Thus the 130 is every bit the trophy that the 160-inch deer is, at least on a natural basis which all results should be based upon.