

Controlling Deer Damage

University of Missouri Extension

Missouri Department of Conservation

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

White-tailed deer are enjoyable to watch, photograph and hunt, but they can cause crop damage. Missouri farmers are tolerant of deer activity and accept certain levels of damage. However, when deer populations, droughts, natural food shortages or economic conditions create hardship, corrective action becomes necessary.

Hunting programs are among the most effective damage control techniques, but they require foresight, planning and commitment by the landowner. The Department of Conservation establishes an annual any-deer permit quota for each deer management unit. We look at various factors in establishing these quotas, and crop damage problems are a primary consideration. While the Department provides the legal framework for harvest, landowners hold the key to regulating local deer herds because they control hunter access.

Although control methods such as repellents, scare devices, out-of-season shooting, and high-tensile electric fencing can be effective, regulated hunting during the firearms deer season is a practical, effective solution to deer damage problems. To be most effective, hunting must be organized, targeted toward certain animals and intense enough to affect deer populations.

Deer hunting programs are an important step in controlling deer damage on the farm. The Department of Conservation recognizes the importance of landowner decisions in granting or refusing hunters access, but also realizes that excessively conservative hunting programs will aggravate existing damage problems. This leaflet summarizes techniques farmers have found useful.

The objective

Landowners have the opportunity to combine deer population control and hunting recreation. Farmers wanting to control deer damage must permit a **maximum harvest of adult female deer**.

Hunting exclusively for antlered bucks does little to control a deer herd because it doesn't affect the reproductive capability of the deer population. One buck can breed many does in a single season. Harvest pressure **must** be on female deer if herd control is desired.

Recruit effective hunters

Invite hunters who are safe, dependable and capable. Landowners typically manage hunting opportunities on their land to maximize the enjoyment of their family and friends. This need not change. Hunters can be family, friends or reliable new acquaintances; remember, their efforts will determine the success or failure of the hunting program on your farm.

Require hunters to apply for an any-deer permit. Hunters may apply for permits between August 15 and September 15 each year. You can help by reminding them of the application period and providing them with applications. Supplies of any-deer permit applications (25 or more) are available by contacting the Special Permits Clerk, Missouri Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City 65102, telephone (573) 751-4115. Be sure to indicate that you have had crop damage on your farm.

Specify that hunters with an any-deer permit harvest antlerless deer. Locate these hunters in your most promising areas. Give them the option of bagging that monster buck — if it wanders by — but let them know that they should pass up ordinary antlered deer in favor of does. When possible, an adult doe should be selected from a group of does and fawns. Predictably, most hunters will readily accept the opportunity to hunt on a farm like yours.

Hunting strategies

Minimize scouting the week before opening day. Strange as it may seem, scouting immediately before the season may reduce hunter success. Deer quickly recognize the unfamiliar odors, sounds and sights of people afield and move to less disturbed areas. Scouting is essential but should be done several weeks prior to the hunt.

Concentrate hunting efforts on opening weekend. Deer are most vulnerable on the opening day of the season. They quickly become aware of hunter activity and alter their behavior accordingly. To maximize the female deer harvest, you should accommodate as many hunters as practical on the first two days of the firearms deer season. An ideal hunter density is one hunter for every 10 to 20 acres of woodland.

Hunt from stands, preferably tree stands that improve visibility for the hunter and lessen chances for detection by deer. By necessity, hunters should be assigned hunting stands and asked not to move unnecessarily.

Let roving hunters on neighboring properties force deer onto your farm and to your hunters. Stalking is an enjoyable hunting technique, but early in the season it works against your objective of maximizing the harvest of female deer. Further, moving hunters are as likely to force deer from your farm as they are to expose them to your hunters. Wait until later in the season to permit stalking and do so only when hunter numbers are fewer.

Safety is extremely important; make sure stands and hunters are located beyond the hunting perimeter of other hunters and that hunters know the location of other stands.

Refill productive stands. Certain stands are excellent year after year. When a deer is bagged at one of these, encourage another hunter to refill the stand. On some farms, as many as four or five deer may be taken in this manner from a single stand on opening day.

Encourage hunters to remain on their stands throughout the day. Many deer are bagged about noon, after they have been disturbed by other hunters returning for lunch. Your hunters should have lunch with them and be comfortable enough to remain in the stand.

Maintain the pressure after opening weekend. Stands will continue to produce deer throughout the season. However, deer become more difficult to bag as the season progresses. Deer may move frequently at night, restricting daytime activities to heavy cover. If fewer hunters are in the field, driving deer from cedar thickets, brushy creek bottoms and regenerating clearcuts to pre-positioned standers can be fruitful. As few as four hunters are needed for an organized drive, but six, eight or 10 are more effective.

Work with neighbors and the Department of Conservation. Deer damage usually affects all farms in a community. To be most effective, neighboring farms should adopt similar programs. Encourage your neighbors to do so. Your conservation agent or a wildlife damage control agent from the Department of Conservation can provide further advice on deer damage control.