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Missouri Deer Season Forecast

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Jefferson City, Missouri - Some parts of Missouri will have more deer this year, and a bumper crop of corn will affect hunting strategies. The Missouri Department of Conservation says decisions that hunters make in harvesting deer are among the most significant factors affecting deer numbers this year and in the future.

Conservation Department Resource Scientist Emily Flinn says this year's mild summer will send deer into autumn in good physical condition. Hot, dry summers, like those of 2012 and 2013, cause physical stress on deer, increasing their nutritional needs while simultaneously reducing food supplies. Deer got a break from the weather this year, with cooler than average temperatures and plenty of food.

The Conservation Department tracks deer populations at the county level by analyzing the number and sex of deer checked during deer season and through surveys of hunters and landowners. It also factors in other influences, such as disease.

Deer populations in central, northern, and western Missouri have decreased steadily over the past decade partially as a result of regulations that allowed hunters to shoot more does.

“It's important to remember that deer numbers were significantly above target levels in the early 2000s,” says Flinn. “The liberal regulations were intended to gain control of the deer population, and they did. Then the hemorrhagic disease outbreaks in 2012 and 2013 pushed populations even farther below desired levels in some areas. The Conservation Department reduced the number of firearm antlerless permits that hunters can fill in some

counties this year to allow the population to increase back to desired levels.”

Flinn says the effects of previous hemorrhagic disease outbreaks will continue to be felt this year. That is particularly true in the northern half of the state. However, losses to blue tongue and epizootic hemorrhagic disease were not spread evenly across any region of the state.

“Localized deer populations that experienced moderate to high hemorrhagic mortality from the 2012 outbreak and last year in northeast Missouri have likely not recovered to levels prior to the outbreak,” says Flinn. “Due to the localized manner in which hemorrhagic disease operates, it is important that hunters and landowners continue to reduce doe harvest if deer numbers in their areas are below desired levels. On the other hand, if numbers in a localized area are at or above desired levels, then the continuing doe harvest is necessary to reduce or maintain populations.”

In contrast, she says, several years of conservative harvest regulations in southern Missouri have allowed deer populations to slowly increase. However, deer population levels are still largely below desired levels in much of southern Missouri.

Deer population size affects deer harvest, but other factors are important, too. One of the most important factors is food availability.

In southern Missouri, acorns dominate deer diets in the fall and winter. When acorns are plentiful, deer can find all the food they need without moving around much. This tends to spread deer across the forested landscape, making them difficult to find. Conversely, in years when acorns are scarce, deer move around more and tend to concentrate around available food sources, making them easier to find. Early reports indicate that Missouri will have an average crop of acorns from both white and red oaks this year, neither helping nor hindering hunters in the Ozarks.

“Scouting can help hunters figure out deer travel routes and where they might be visible,” says Flinn.

She also advised hunters to consider how agricultural activity on neighboring land might affect deer behavior.

Flinn emphasizes the important role hunters play in determining local deer population size and structure. Shooting one or two does on your property might not seem very significant, but in combination with deer harvest on adjacent land, it can add up.

“Most people think the Conservation Department manages deer, but in reality it is a collaborative effort between the Department and hunters and landowners,” says Flinn. “On private land, our management is on a large scale. We can regulate how many antlerless tags a hunter can fill in a particular county, but hunters and landowners ultimately make the decision about how many deer to harvest within constraints of regulations. So hunters and landowners have a great deal of influence on local deer numbers.”

Flinn says the patchy nature of losses to hemorrhagic diseases across the landscape makes hunter involvement in managing deer more important than ever. Hunters who see that deer numbers are down where they hunt should consider the future when deciding whether to harvest does.

The first step in managing local deer populations is coordinating your hunting activities with neighbors. Forming a deer cooperative can be as simple as sitting down over coffee to discuss what you want to achieve. Once you agree on goals for the local deer herd, the next step is tailoring your deer harvest to achieve those goals. More information on the status of Missouri’s deer population and regional trends in deer populations is available in the 2013-2014 Missouri Deer Season Summary and Population Status Report mdc.mo.gov/node/28399.

This year’s deer-hunting regulations include changes to availability of firearms antlerless permits in some counties. Details about this and other regulations, including season dates, are available in the 2014 Fall Deer & Turkey Hunting Regulation and Information booklet. It is available wherever hunting permits are sold or at mdc.mo.gov/node/3656.

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