

Should I track my sightings or do a Camera Survey?

One of the main questions that I am getting is whether people should track their actual sightings or just do a trail camera survey. Like I have said in many of my other articles “Everyone’s situation is different” so you should do what works best for your own particular situation. I am going to explain some different scenarios so you can get a better understanding of what may work best for you. Even though everyone can track their deer harvests (regardless of whether you have 10 acres or 10,000 acres) tracking the sightings may not work in all situations but a trail camera survey might.

The question you need to ask yourself is do you want to keep track of your actual sightings during hunting season so you can determine if you are seeing more or less deer each season. This should really apply to most unfenced properties (unless you have thousands of contiguous acres hunted strictly under your control). Since the smaller acreage properties have deer moving off and onto their properties their neighbors can definitely affect their deer population. And you may actually be harvesting too many or too few deer yourself. Because of this **we** choose to enter all of our sightings during hunting season so we can see if our sightings are going up, going down or remaining about the same. Let’s face it; if our neighbors go on a killing spree then we will definitely see the results of that in our sightings since we do share a lot of deer with them. Keep in mind that the more sightings information you have over several days the more representative the results will be. If you can get the sightings information not only for yourself but from your co hunters as well then that will be even better. You can now prove what your average deer sightings are per hunt and can compare it season to season. If you have enough days of recorded sightings from throughout the season then you may also be able to estimate your Doe to Buck Ratio and your Fawn Recruitment Rate. Since we have many days of sightings from throughout our hunting season we get a good estimate of our Doe to Buck Ratio and Fawn Recruitment Rate. (Our Bucks are not totally nocturnal) Let’s use some common sense though. If you hunt a handful of days each season or you’re hunting small acreage then you probably won’t be able to estimate your Doe to Buck Ratio and Fawn Recruitment Rate from your sightings. Also if your Bucks are strictly nocturnal then you won’t be able to estimate your Doe to Buck Ratio since you won’t be seeing the Buck’s. (And that’s ok) *But you can still track your sightings and harvests so you can compare them season to season which will tell you if you are seeing and shooting more or less deer each season.* This is accomplished in the Basic Version of our software.

Even though we track our actual sightings during hunting season I also do a trail camera survey to verify that our Doe to Buck Ratio and Fawn Recruitment Rate are looking close to what our actual sightings history is showing. Remember that we have over 1000 acres. I also use the survey to estimate how many different Bucks we have on our property. I enter this count of the Bucks into the computer so I can see this for each season. Being able to compare how many different Bucks we get a picture of each season is another way to see if we have more or less Bucks each season. I don’t actually enter the cumulative Doe, Fawn and Buck counts from my survey because I want my sightings to reflect how many deer we are seeing during hunting season. We want to know for sure if our sightings are going up, going down or remaining about the same during each hunting season.

Before I continue let me explain what a trail camera survey is:

We use five cameras to cover our 1100 acres. Approximately one camera for every 100 to 150 acres should be fine. You should have enough cameras to be able to get pictures of most of the deer on your property. You can always move the cameras around like I do so you can cover more territory. Our Bucks don't start shedding their velvet until September so I wait until then to start my camera survey. Also, the fawns should be accompanying their mother at this point and no longer be in hiding. In September/October I start my camera survey so I can try to estimate the following three items. The first thing that I want to estimate is our Doe to Buck ratio. The second thing that I want to estimate is our fawn recruitment rate. The third thing that I want to estimate is how many individual Bucks are on our property. You should try to cover over a thousand acres so you can come up with representative results. This may mean getting some neighbors together to see if you can come up with 1000 plus acres. Let me now review how I do my camera survey in more detail.

I put our cameras at our feeders (legal in Georgia) for two weeks and then move them to a field or food plot with corn in front of them (again legal in Georgia) for another two to three weeks. The reason I move the cameras is because I determined several years ago that some of our deer do not go to our feeders. Because I get so many pictures I will actually swap out the camera cards each week so I am only getting one week's worth of pictures. I may get three to four thousand pictures total between the five cameras in one week. When I review the pictures I count how many Does, how many Fawns and how many Bucks I see in each picture. I keep a running total so I can come up with a grand total of how many Does, Fawns and Bucks I counted. You may count the same Doe and Fawn 50 times but that is ok. You may also count the same Buck 40 times and that is ok. When I feel confident that I have gotten a good sampling of our Does, Fawns and Bucks I can now estimate our Doe to Buck ratio and our Fawn recruitment rate. (I can usually get a good sampling in 2 to 3 weeks) I simply divide the number of Does that I counted by the number of Bucks that I counted to get my estimated Doe to Buck ratio. I then divide the number of Fawns that I counted by the number of Does that I counted to get my estimated fawn recruitment rate. During the total four to six weeks that I have my cameras out I try to isolate the different Bucks that are in the pictures. Please read my article "[How do you determine how many different Bucks you have](#)" to see what I do to estimate how many different Bucks we have.

*In the Advanced Version of my software I have two formulas that you can use to estimate your Doe to Buck ratio and your Fawn recruitment rate using the counts from above. If you are able to estimate how many individual Bucks you have on your property then you can use the second formula to not only estimate your deer population but approximately how many deer you need to harvest in order to reach your desired deer population and Doe to Buck ratio. **Unfenced properties should not try to use the number of individual Bucks you count because you are counting some of your neighbors Bucks.** If you are interested in what I am doing please read my article "How we estimate our Deer Population and Harvest Requirements" to see the special analysis that I have to do!*

You can see how I have used my trail camera survey to confirm our Doe to Buck ratio and our Fawn recruitment rate that is calculated based on our actual sightings. The only way to estimate how many different Bucks you have is by analyzing the trail camera pictures. Again, you should leave your cameras out and possibly even move them around until you feel confident that you have gotten pictures of most of your deer. By moving my cameras around I end up having approximately one camera per hundred acres. I feel confident that we get pictures of most, if not all of our deer. Nobody knows our property as well as we do and I'm sure the same is true for you and your property.

If your property is under a high fence or you control several thousand acres then you may not want to track your actual sightings since you don't have any (or many) deer leaving your property. A camera survey will work great in estimating your Doe to Buck Ratio, Fawn Recruitment Rate and your Total

Deer Population. You can actually enter the counts from your camera survey into the sightings file so it will estimate your Doe to Buck Ratio and Fawn Recruitment Rate. By entering this information you will establish a history of these counts and the ratios calculated for each season. If you can also estimate the number of individual Bucks you have on your property from your camera survey then you can also enter that so you can compare how many individual Bucks you have season by season. If you were able to estimate your number of individual Bucks then you can even estimate your deer population and harvest requirements. These capabilities are in the Advanced Version of our software.

Let's now review some various scenarios and I'll tell you what I would do:

1. I only have 70 acres that I hunt and forget about trying to work with my neighbors.

I would at least monitor my sightings so I can tell if my sightings are going up, going down or remaining about the same each season. You don't have enough acreage to calculate a Doe to Buck Ratio and a Fawn Recruitment Rate. After I cumulated this information for a few seasons I would try to get with the neighbors to share the information that I am getting. They just might show an interest in what you are seeing (*or not seeing*). This can be quite impressive when you bring up your information from a device that is connected to the internet. I brought my information up on my smart phone and my neighbor was quite impressed. If you can show them that your sightings are going down or are really low they may also become concerned about your/their deer population and they just might show an interest in working together to see if the situation can be changed. And of course you should enter the information for all of the deer that you harvest so you can track that as well.

2. I have 100 acres and I can get most of my neighbors to work together to try to analyze our deer populations. We will have close to 1000 acres.

Option 1: I would organize this group so we could do a Trail Camera Survey covering most of the 1000 acres. As a result of the Trail Camera Survey we would estimate our Doe to Buck Ratio and Fawn Recruitment Rate. We would also analyze the pictures to determine approximately how many different Bucks there is on the adjoining properties. **If** we were able to estimate the number of resident Bucks I would then estimate the deer population using my formula in the Advanced Version of my software. By entering the trail camera counts into the computer as well as all of the deer that were harvested by all of us we will now be able to closely monitor our deer population and harvests season by season.

Option 2: If a Trail Camera Survey is out of the question then I would have all of the hunters capable of identifying a Buck, Doe and Fawn write down their sightings after each hunt. I would gladly enter all of the sightings for everyone either during the season or after the season ends. By entering the sightings we will establish an estimate of how many deer we are seeing per hunt and will be able to compare this season to season. Everyone would also write down the information on each deer that they harvested so we will be able to see how many deer are being harvested season by season.

3. I have 1200 acres but I've given up trying to work with our neighbors.

Since I'm concerned that the neighbors may be shooting a lot of deer (deer that we share) I will definitely track our actual sightings so we can see what our average deer sightings are per hunt season by season. Since I have over 1000 acres I will also do a Trail Camera Survey so I can estimate our Doe to Buck Ratio, Fawn Recruitment Rate and number of different Buck's. I will compare the ratios calculated in the camera survey to the ratios calculated from our actual sightings to see if they are close to each other. This will help me determine what rates I should use if I decide that I can estimate our deer population. If I can estimate our number of resident Bucks I will definitely try to estimate our deer population. And of course we will enter the information for all of the deer that we harvest so we can track that as well.

4. I have a high fenced property.

Having a fenced in property eliminates the neighbor influence. You don't have deer moving on and off of your property. You truly have your own deer herd. In this situation I really don't need to track my actual sightings because I have total control of my deer (except for predators, disease etc.). I would definitely do a Trail Camera Survey so I could estimate my Doe to Buck Ratio, Fawn Recruitment Rate and number of different Buck's. I would enter my camera counts into my sightings history including the number of different Bucks so I would establish a history of this information season by season. If I was able to estimate the number of individual Bucks I would definitely estimate the deer population as well as approximately how many deer we should harvest in order to reach our desired deer population and Doe to Buck Ratio. Having this information season by season is a great tool to help you monitor and manage your deer population.

5. We have such a short deer season that there really aren't enough days hunted to get accurate results. If the deer aren't moving for these 4 days then my sightings will look bad. On the other hand if the deer are moving good then my sightings will look good.

Because it is such a short season *if* the situation allowed it I would actually do some visual observation counts just before the season opened. If I and my co-hunters could do this a few different days throughout September and/or October for example I would count my sightings and even enter those into the computer. If I did this consistently every season then I would be able to compare this information season to season. If I had large acreage I would also do a Trail Camera Survey as mentioned above. I would at least like to count how many different Bucks we have for a comparison year to year. If I'm able to estimate my deer population then I would do that as well. And most importantly we will definitely enter the information for all of the deer that we harvest so we can track that season by season.

6. We have 2000 acres and are a commercial hunting operation. We can't depend on getting accurate sightings counts from our customers. We do check in every deer that is harvested though.

Since you have over 1000 acres I would definitely do a trail camera survey as described above. This would allow me to estimate the Doe to Buck Ratio, Fawn Recruitment Rate and number of individual Buck's. I would be able to compare these three things season to season. If I was able to estimate the number of resident Bucks I would also estimate the deer population and

harvest requirements. And of course recording the deer harvested each season is important so we can monitor the deer harvested season to season.

The above scenarios just represent a small percentage of the various situations that exist for different properties. I'm hoping I gave you enough examples so you can determine if you can track your sightings or do a trail camera survey for your own specific situation. But remember everyone should be able to track their deer harvested.

In summary, we should all keep track of how many deer we have harvested season by season. I can't tell you how valuable it is to be able to bring up our deermanage.com account on the internet when we have any questions about deer that we have previously harvested. When we were driving to our property a few weeks ago we couldn't remember how many deer Ron had shot a couple of years ago. I simply brought up our account on deermanage.com on my smart phone and I answered the question immediately. In addition to the deer harvested we should also try to keep track of our deer sightings or our camera counts season by season. We no longer assume that we're seeing more or less deer. We know it for a fact because we do some simple record keeping. I don't have to tell someone that we're seeing more or less deer. I show them proof of it by having our monitoring reports. Sometimes we get so caught up in just growing big antlered Bucks that we forget to monitor the other important aspects of our deer population. This stuff sounds far more complicated than it really is. It's simple to write down the information on each deer that you harvest. And if you're capable of writing down how many Does, Fawns and Bucks you see on each hunt or through your trail camera pictures then you should also be able to keep those records as well. Don't let a computer scare you away. If you aren't comfortable using a computer I'm sure your spouse, child or friend would gladly enter your information for you. *And if you can't find someone to enter your information for you then contact us about entering your data for you for a nominal charge.*

And by all means please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or need any help in determining what may work best for your own situation. Let's stop assuming and start proving!