

Can you improve your Hunting?

I thoroughly enjoy talking to other deer hunters because it gives me the opportunity to compare the various situations that exist among different properties and different hunting groups. One thing I can assure you is that if you think you have it bad there is someone else who has it worse. In the same token if you think you have it great there is someone else who has it greater. I think that we should each strive to make our hunting the best that it can be for our own individual situations. What surprises me is how many hunters don't even give a thought to the possibility that they may be able to improve their deer hunting. This includes hunters that think their hunting is poor all the way up to hunters that think their hunting is great. Whether you think that your hunting is poor or you think your hunting is great you should consider the possibility that it can be better and what can you do to make it better. In this article I want to make some suggestions on how different properties may be able to improve their hunting. It is possible that one or maybe even all of these suggestions may allow you to improve your hunting.

With that being said let's now discuss some things that you may be able to do to improve your hunting. The problem is what do I mean by "Improve your Hunting"? For some people it means that they want to see and possibly shoot more deer. For other people it may mean that they want to see more Bucks. And then there are people that are seeing enough deer but they want to see more older or bigger antlered Bucks. So you need to determine what you would like to improve and what your own expectations are for your own property.

Here are a few things that you may be able to do to improve your hunting:

1. **Reduce Hunting Pressure.** Wild deer have a natural fear of people. Whether you are walking through the woods leaving a human scent trail, sitting in a stand and a deer winds you or you are shooting at a deer, these situations all alert a deer to danger. Too many of these encounters can make a deer relocate to a different area or possibly just become nocturnal. Obviously if your deer are totally nocturnal then you won't see any deer during daylight (shooting) hours. You might as well not even have any deer. To increase your odds of seeing and possibly shooting a deer you should try to minimize the amount of pressure you put on the deer on your property. I have seen properties where there is one hunter for every 20 acres and I have seen properties where there is one hunter for every 500+ acres. More than likely the property with fewer acres per hunter will receive more hunting pressure which could affect daytime movement of their deer. Unfortunately most hunt clubs have to have a certain number of members in order for everyone to be able to afford the lease payment. If this means that you must have one hunter for every 20 acres then it is what it is. The only other thing that you may be able to consider is establishing some rules or guidelines that may help reduce the amount of pressure on your deer. These rules would be specific to your own situation and would have to be accepted by all of your members. Here are some examples. Can you limit the number of people on the property at one time? Can you limit the amount of walking around on the property other than to and from their stand? Can you limit vehicle usage including where

vehicles can drive? Please read my article “What is Hunting Pressure?” where I cover this in more detail.

2. **Land Management.** I am referring to food, cover and water. You can also refer to this as Habitat Management. Many hunt clubs are not afforded the opportunity to supplement or enhance the habitat on the properties that they hunt. As a result of this they can't really make any changes in this regard. But, if you are able to manipulate your landscape then creating habitat that provides the deer with healthy food, cover and water will definitely allow you to keep more deer (and possibly healthier deer) on your property. More deer means more deer sightings and more deer shot. (unless you're having issues with #1 above) You may be able to plant food plots and/or provide supplemental feed (if legal). You can get with a biologist (possibly even a state biologist if they have time) or a forester to determine if you can plant certain trees or plants that will benefit your wildlife. They may recommend clear cutting, select cutting, burning, chopping etc. They will be knowledgeable of the various trees and plants that will be adaptable to your specific area and they will know how these trees and plants can benefit your wildlife. If you are not the landowner then encourage the landowner to consider enhancing their property to not only benefit the wildlife but possibly even increase the value of their property.
3. **Harvest Guidelines.** If you would just like to see more deer and your area is capable of carrying more deer without diminishing the health of the deer then you can establish harvest guidelines. You may decide to limit the number of Bucks and/or Doe's each hunter can take. This may allow you to increase the deer population in your area which in turn may increase your deer sightings. If you want to see more older or bigger antlered Bucks then maybe you can establish some rules on which Bucks may be harvested. You may be able to establish an APR (Antler Point Restriction) which will protect your younger Bucks. You shouldn't establish an APR without collecting and analyzing data on a large sampling of Bucks that have been harvested in your own specific area. Many hunters just randomly establish the restriction “If the antlers are outside the ears” then you can shoot the Buck. Even though this will work on many properties it will **not** work on all properties. Please read my articles “Antler Restrictions gone Bad” and “How to analyze your Buck's Antler Characteristics”. Instead of an APR the better way is to have your members learn how to age a Buck on the hoof. If you have not done so already please watch our video “How to age a Buck on the Hoof”. If you are able to protect your 1 ½ and 2 ½ year old Bucks then the age structure of your Buck population will definitely go up. This simply means that you will have a lot more 3 ½ year old and older Buck's which is what you are trying to accomplish. Some properties may want to protect 3 ½ and 4 ½ year old Bucks which is entirely their decision to make. Remember, everyone's situation is different!
4. **Manipulate your Doe to Buck Ratio.** If you want to see more Bucks and older and bigger antlered Bucks then first of all you must have Bucks/older Bucks in your area. If you know that they are in your area but you just don't seem to have any luck seeing them during hunting hours then consider this. Older Bucks are slick. Several years ago at the crack of dawn I watched an older Buck herd up a group of Does and force them to bed down in a 1/4 acre area. I remained in my stand until after lunch and went back to camp. I decided that I would go back to my stand about 3 hours before dark. Sure enough, just before dark I saw the Does and this

older Buck slowly leave the area where he had bedded them down. He was certainly controlling his harem. Also on this same property we would walk or drive our 4 wheelers around the property and quite often we would jump a Doe, and a Buck would be bedded down with her. We knew we had a lot of Bucks on the property but we just weren't seeing many of them while we were hunting from our stands. On this particular property we had about a 3.5 to 1 Doe to Buck ratio. These experiences are why we decided to tighten up our Doe to Buck ratio on the property we currently hunt. We wanted to make the Buck's have to move around to find a Doe instead of him just having Does all around him. Tightening our Doe to Buck ratio has been a key to our management success. Do not just guess at what your Doe to Buck ratio is. You should do a trail camera survey and/or keep track of your observation counts. I cover this process in some of my other articles. But, keep in mind if you are trying to increase your deer population then you may want to leave your ratio high until you get your population to the desired level.

- 5. Work with your neighbors.** Right now many of you are thinking "forget this"! Your neighbors shoot all of your deer. Unfortunately, there are properties where deer are purposely not shot and then some of these deer do get shot on neighboring properties. We used to think that every Buck we let walk was being shot by our neighbors. That is until I put my trail cameras out after the season and we surprisingly proved that most of the Bucks we let walk did survive the season. You take the initiative and try to meet all of your neighbors. Tell them that you would like to try to improve the hunting in the area and would like to see if several of the neighbors would be interested in discussing the possible ways to improve the hunting. A BBQ get together is a great way to meet, discuss and share information on the hunting in your area. You might be surprised at how many hunters would like to see the hunting improve. If you can gather enough neighbors to cover 1000+ acres then you may be surprised at what you can accomplish. I would try even if we only had the cooperation of 100 acres. Remember that these Bucks are slick and because he screwed up and walked by you doesn't mean he'll walk by someone else. I actually consider this step the most important step for unfenced properties. The more neighbors you can recruit the more acreage you will have participating in a common management plan. Just remember that everybody will not agree on everything so each person or group will have to give or take. As an example, even though you may want all 1 ½ and 2 ½ year old Bucks protected maybe some of the neighbors will only want to protect 1 ½ year old Bucks. You should look at this optimistically in that at least they are letting yearling Bucks walk. Your group and possibly some of the other groups would go ahead and let the 2 ½ year old Bucks walk since you are trying to get the Bucks out to an older age class. Remember that a 2 ½ year old Buck is harder to shoot than a 1 ½ year old Buck so don't assume that all of the 2 ½ year old Bucks will be shot because they probably won't be. As the neighbors start to see that the management plan is showing positive results then they may go ahead and support protecting 2 ½ year old Bucks as well. The difficult thing about this is you won't see this improvement in one season. It may take three or four seasons before you start seeing the results that you are striving for. Once you start seeing the results though, it is a very gratifying feeling. One other thing that is important is that you should keep records of the entire participating area each season. If everyone would write down some basic information on each deer that is shot you will

be able to analyze your deer harvests for the entire participating area. Being able to follow this information season by season is invaluable. Don't depend on your memories to decide if the management plan is failing or working.

Even though we feel that we have great hunting, we are always looking for ways to improve it. It is important that we continually monitor our deer sightings and harvests so we will immediately recognize if something is changing (for better or worse). You won't just hear us say that we are seeing more or less deer than we used to see. We will show you our records which will prove what is happening! We have disproved our memories multiple times and that goes for our younger hunters as well. It is truly amazing how one bad hunting trip can make you think that your hunting is going bad.

More and more hunting groups are keeping records and are continuously monitoring their deer harvests and sightings. They realize the importance of keeping track of this information. Knowing how many Does and Bucks you have harvested each and every season is important. Add to that the age and weight of each of these deer and you now have some very important information that can be used in analyzing your property. On the other hand many groups keep no records and simply continue to do what they have been doing for years or possibly decades. The problem with this is that situations can and do change and it's important to recognize when your situation is changing.

Here are just a few examples of how your situation may change:

1. You may get new neighbors. Suddenly the neighbors that used to selectively harvest deer like you are replaced by neighbors that shoot any deer that they see. Or maybe their number of hunters has doubled or tripled. As a result of this the new neighbors may now be having a diverse effect on your deer population. On the other hand it is possible that the new neighbors may not harvest enough deer. Don't chuckle because this is happening in some areas today. If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say "Our neighbors shoot all of our deer" I would be quite wealthy. Heck, we said the same thing several years ago until we started keeping some basic records and doing some trail camera surveys. We were quite *humbled* when we proved that our neighbors were not shooting all of these deer that we were letting walk.
2. Your deer mortality rate is changing. This may be caused by severe weather, predators (coyotes, wolves, bobcats...), disease, etc. If some of your deer succumb to the severe winter or a disease outbreak then this will have an effect on your deer population. Also, if predation is increasing it will also have an effect on your deer population. Because of these things we have to analyze our deer sightings and/or trail camera counts to determine if we need to reduce or possibly increase our deer harvests in the upcoming season.
3. You may not be harvesting enough deer. Sometimes we get so caught up in selective harvest guidelines that we may not be harvesting enough deer (especially Bucks). When the deer population exceeds the carrying capacity of the area the health of the deer will decline. You may be happy that you are seeing a lot of deer but would you still be happy if you knew that Buck that has 130 inches of antler on his head could have had 140+ inches if the deer population wasn't so high. In the same token your fawn recruitment rate which is

currently .55 might be .65 or higher if the Does were healthier than they are. (Fawn recruitment rate is the percentage of Fawns to Does)

4. You may be harvesting too many deer. It's easy to become complacent and you just continue to shoot deer like you always have. If your deer population takes a hit because of a harsh winter, disease or over harvest then you need to be able to determine this and possibly reduce your deer harvests in the upcoming season to allow the deer population to rebound. We want to know if collectively we used to average shooting 10 Bucks each season and now we are only shooting 5 Bucks each season. If we did this on purpose then fine but if not then we need to figure out what has happened and how can we fix it.

In summary, ask yourself if you can improve your hunting. Get together with your entire hunt group and possibly even your neighbors and discuss the possibility of improving the hunting in your area. You may be surprised at how many of the hunters would like to improve the hunting if it's possible. Discuss the possible ways that you may be able to improve the hunting and see if everyone will agree on some guidelines that everyone can follow. **No, you're not trying to take the fun out of hunting. You are just trying to make it more fun by seeing and possibly shooting more or bigger deer!** Have everyone write down some simple information on each deer that they harvest and then you or one of the people in the hunt group can record all of this information so you will know how your management plan is working based on facts. If you're not happy with your hunting it's easy to blame the state biologists because the bag limits are too high or the hunting season is too long. It's also easy to blame the neighbors and yes there are some difficult situations out there but let's each take the responsibility for our own properties and start establishing our own guidelines for our own properties. (Of course we need to stay within the state laws) Each and every one of us should do what we can to preserve this great sport we call "Deer Hunting".