

# Considerations for Winter Deer Feeding in Wisconsin

## Deer are adapted to winter

Deer adapt physiologically and behaviorally to survive the rigorous winters of Wisconsin. Deer are less active and feed less during late December to late February. At this time they are utilizing their body fat reserves acquired on their summer and fall ranges. This is especially important since natural winter foods (browse) are less nutritious and less abundant than summer foods. Whether an individual deer is able to survive the winter depends largely on the deer's physical health going into winter, the severity and duration of winter, the amount of quality food available and the amount of energy the animal uses.



Some deer, especially fawns and older deer, die in any winter regardless of severity. Mortality among these age groups increases as the winter severity increases. These animals usually have insufficient amounts of stored energy (body fat), and may be unable to find and compete with other deer for available food. The majority of deer will survive even the harshest winter without the need for supplemental feeding. Occasional severe winters and deer losses are normal in northern areas of our state. The majority of mortalities tend to occur in March or April as deer body fat is depleted.

## Food for Thought

If done wrong, winter feeding can do more harm than good. Therefore, you need to be prepared to **DO IT RIGHT OR DON'T DO IT AT ALL**. Your first action should be to consult your local wildlife biologist. Feeding does very little to help the regional deer herd survive winter because most of the herd (as much as 70%) is inaccessible to feeding.

Be aware that feeding can attract significant numbers of deer which increases the risk of disease transmission, such as chronic wasting disease and tuberculosis, as well as causes stress or injury to deer through fighting. Feeding deer near a residence or business can also cause heavy browsing on ornamental trees and shrubs. Congregating deer can attract predators or increase chasing by domestic dogs which may add additional stress and survival factors. Finally, the financial costs can be high and lead to improper feeding activities.

## Regulations for Feeding Deer:

No person may place or allow the placement of supplemental deer feed:

- in quantities of more than 2 gallons for each owner-occupied residence or business, regardless of property size.
- more than 50 yards from an owner-occupied residence or business.
- within 100 yards of a roadway having a posted speed limit of 45 mph or more.
- without the approval of the owner of the owner-occupied residence or business.
- at a deer feeding site that is known to be used by bear or elk.
- in a county in which feeding is prohibited. A map of counties where feeding is prohibited can be found at [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov), search baiting and feeding regulations.



Providing deer with a heavy corn diet can be fatal. See the list of suggested alternatives on the next page.

# If You Choose to Feed Deer

## Feeds

After considering the issues surrounding deer feeding, should you decide to feed deer, the following information on food types should be considered:

**Deer food mixes:** Formulated deer food mixes consisting of corn, alfalfa, oats, soybeans, molasses and several vitamins and minerals are the best choice. Many feed mills in Wisconsin sell this mixture in pellet or meal form. If such a mix is not available, rabbit, goat or horse pellets which contain at least 12% protein can be used. By late February, deer that have been accustomed to eating and digesting woody browse for most of the winter are able to digest this food.

**Oats:** After the formulated deer food mixtures, oats are preferred over all other supplemental foods. They provide deer with a very favorable ratio of fiber and carbohydrates.

**Corn:** **DO NOT** feed deer a pure corn diet as the high starch content of corn can cause high acidity in the rumen which kills microorganisms necessary for digesting food.

**Hay:** **DO NOT** feed hay to deer. When deer have encountered low food supplies, rumen activity decreases and fermentation of fiber decreases. The fiber type in hay cannot be readily broken down. Deer can have full stomachs of hay and still die from starvation.

## Additional Considerations

If your intent is to attempt to help deer survive through a severe winter, the best approach is to provide woody browse by dropping aspen or maple trees so that deer can access the twigs and buds from the tops. If that is not possible, you may start feeding a deer mix in late February and continue through snow melt or until deer have dispersed to summer habitats. March and early April is the time of winter when most deer will succumb to winter stress. Also consider the following:

- consult your local wildlife biologist before starting any feeding efforts.
- read the rules that regulate feeding.
- try to feed near sheltered areas with conifer cover that are out of the wind.
- feed only where deer currently exist to avoid pulling deer out of good winter cover.

- do not feed in areas of high human, dog, automobile and snowmobile activity.
- place food in multiple small piles to reduce competition among deer.

## The DNR's Role

The DNR's role is to ensure a healthy deer herd for the sustainable use of future generations. This requires a long-term approach and **good habitat is the key**.

The Natural Resources Board has adopted the following policy that outlines the DNR's role during severe winters:

“Winter deer survival is largely dependent on fat acquired on summer range. Occasional severe winters will result in deer mortality in Wisconsin, and are considered normal for northern deer and will occur regardless of winter habitat quality. Severe deer losses can be avoided most effectively by maintaining quality summer habitat. Direct feeding is seldom effective on a regional basis, and can be detrimental if done improperly. The cost and logistics of feeding enough deer to produce a measureable result in subsequent years precludes feeding as normal public policy. The DNR does recognize the public concern for malnourished deer, public desire to feed stressed deer regardless of cost or measureable results and the benefits to individual animals which are properly fed.”

## Want to know more?

For more information on feeding deer please contact your local DNR Wildlife Biologist or visit our webpage at <http://dnr.wi.gov>.

Helpful links:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/hunt/bait.html>

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/deermanagement.html>

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/documents/wsi.pdf>

