



Aim for an antlerless state of mind

WHEN IT COMES TO DEER MANAGEMENT, EVERY HUNTER PLAYS A ROLE.

Story by Jeff Pritzl and photos by Linda Freshwaters Arndt

Every year since 1983, with one exception, Wisconsin deer hunters have harvested more antlerless deer than bucks when everything is tallied up at the end of each season. Shooting antlerless deer is certainly an accepted practice in general. Yet personal opinions and values that determine whether a hunter decides to squeeze the trigger on an antlerless deer are varied and complex.

Comfort level with taking antlerless deer is often associated with deer sighting frequency. Am I seeing more or fewer deer than previous years? Am I seeing more or fewer deer compared to my neighbors? Have deer become so numerous that browse damage to vegetation has become noticeable? Am I seeing more or fewer car-killed deer? And then there is the simple desire to put high-quality red meat in the freezer.

The spectrum of personal opinion on shooting antlerless deer ranges from thinking it's just wrong or unethical to shoot a female or young deer, to preferring young antlerless deer for the excellent venison

they provide. This diversity of opinion exists at the smallest scale within neighborhoods and hunting groups.

But in the end, when hunters have the option to shoot both bucks and antlerless deer, they tend to shoot slightly more antlerless deer. This makes sense because there are more antlerless deer available than bucks in the fall. However, hunters rarely shoot antlerless deer in proportion to their availability. This is where opinion, values and sometimes regulations and season frameworks influence the overall harvest.

Wisconsin has used a variable antlerless harvest quota system for more than a half

century to influence the number of antlerless deer taken each year and provide hunting opportunities. In some cases, the final quota — which is derived by forecasting the fall deer population and receiving public input on the desired harvest — is designed to move the local deer herd toward established population objectives.

But in many parts of Wisconsin, especially the highly productive regions where farm and forest are mixed in a matrix of prime deer habitat, antlerless harvest needs and prescribed antlerless quotas often exceed traditional hunter harvest behaviors.

In hunters' hands

County Deer Advisory Councils (CDACs) have been established to represent hunter and other community interests in deer management. They are charged with establishing an objective of raising, lowering or maintaining the deer population in their specific county.

During the first three years of CDAC implementation, 45 counties have established objectives to maintain or decrease their deer population. Although the CDAC process for establishing hunting season frameworks is working quite well, more than half the counties have found it difficult to achieve an antlerless harvest adequate to reach the population objective.

In the recent past before CDACs, when deer herd growth would exceed hunter harvest at high rates, harvest regulations would kick in to mandate antlerless harvest. Most hunters remember the Earn-A-Buck years. EAB was effective for herd control but generated what many hunters felt to be a poorer hunting experience because hunters were forced to do something they didn't necessarily wish to do based on their personal standards of a successful hunting season and because they did not agree with local deer population estimates that triggered the EAB season structure.

In many ways, the pushback against EAB is what inspired the creation of CDACs. The local community is now empowered to take significant ownership of the outcomes of deer management.

Ideally, antlerless harvest decisions can remain a voluntary choice, rather than a mandated requirement. However, discussions at CDAC meetings often include how to get hunters to voluntarily harvest more antlerless deer.

The right ratio

Maintaining a wildlife population, in this case deer, means that the number of animals leaving the population must be equal to the number of animals entering the population. We know that deer enter the population or are born at a 1:1 sex ratio of bucks to does. But an even 1:1 harvest ratio of bucks and antlerless deer does not create an equal harvest of bucks and does. Here's why:

Legal antlerless deer available for harvest during the hunting season include



Wisconsin has long used an antlerless quota system to enhance hunting opportunities.

both adult does and fawns (both buck and doe). In the highly productive deer regions of the state, as many as half of the antlerless deer going into the hunting season are fawns, and harvest statistics show they are half of the antlerless harvest as well.

Assuming most hunters don't distinguish between doe fawns and buck fawns (though some might), the total antlerless harvest would be comprised of 50 percent adult does, 25 percent doe fawns and 25 percent buck fawns. So a 1:1 harvest ratio of bucks to antlerless deer is actually about one buck for every .75 doe, which does not support proper population maintenance as noted.

Using this logic, maintaining a productive deer herd requires harvesting more antlerless deer than bucks. If the objective is to reduce the herd, it usually takes at least two antlerless deer harvested for each buck; three might be even better, depending on how quickly the herd is sought to be reduced.

Ultimately, this is what Earn-A-Buck was designed to do: increase the ratio of antlerless deer taken per buck taken. So the question now is can hunters voluntarily increase that harvest ratio when the CDAC and DNR call for it?

How many should we shoot?

Deer productivity varies from county to county, and certainly within counties as well. The DNR and CDACs monitor deer populations at the Deer Management Unit (DMU) level, usually the county.

Thanks to decades of mandatory deer registration and tracking of pre- and post-hunting season populations, we can accurately predict population growth potential for each unit. We are pretty darn good at estimating what the buck harvest will be before it happens — usually within 90 percent or better — and this ultimately drives the antlerless harvest goal each year.

The predicted buck harvest and established antlerless quota can be described as a ratio. For example, if the predicted buck harvest is 1,000 and the antlerless quota is 2,300, then the desired outcome at the end of all the deer seasons is a harvest ratio of 1:2.3.

Thinking of it this way, whether you assess your hunting harvest based on a chunk of real estate or among a group of hunters, for each antlered buck that is taken you can compare how your own antlerless harvest stacks up with the established objective of the DMU. Viewing personal harvest goals and results in terms of a ratio of bucks to antlerless deer takes into consideration the variability of deer densities within each DMU.

If you find your area is not living up to the forecasted deer population for the unit as a whole, you will likely see and shoot fewer, if any, bucks and you might understandably also shoot few, if any, antlerless deer.

Keep in mind that if you are choosing to pass up young bucks and may not harvest any this year, some antlerless deer still should be taken. Doing so will put delicious meat in your freezer, save a small buck to grow for one more year and



In cases where herd reduction is the objective, it usually requires taking two antlerless deer for each buck, with three often being even better.



In general each year, more antlerless deer than bucks are available for harvest in fall.

help your local herd reach its maximum capabilities for productivity, rut intensity, trophy potential and more.

If you are fortunate and find your hunting group filling the buck pole, it should indicate that a proportional number of antlerless deer need to be brought in, based on the ratio for your unit. For every hunter who bags just bucks in a highly productive unit, more hunters will need to shoot just antlerless deer to meet the desired harvest ratio.

Attend your CDAC meetings

Establishing an antlerless harvest quota and the hunting season framework needed to achieve it is a community decision. Becoming familiar with the desired harvest ratio of bucks to antlerless deer for your county or unit is a great starting point for your hunting group to plan for the season ahead. And a great place to share those conversations is with your fellow hunters at the annual CDAC meetings.

We all enter the hunting season with expectations, and our sense of satisfaction is influenced by how those expectations are met. Add an expectation to be part of the larger deer hunting community by becoming engaged and informed at CDAC meetings or monitoring the DNR CDAC web pages. Visit dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "CDAC."

Connecting your own state of mind to the goals of your community can add another layer of satisfaction to your overall hunting experience. 🍷

Jeff Pritzl oversees wildlife management for the DNR's Northeast District.

>>> DEER HUNTING DETAILS



ANDY KRAUSHAAR

Getting to know the basics about deer hunting in Wisconsin will help to ensure a safe and successful hunt. In addition to the information here, learn more about all things deer management, including complete 2017 Deer Hunting Regulations, by visiting dnr.wi.gov and searching keyword "deer."

2017 season dates

- 🦌 Archery and crossbow: Sept. 16-Jan. 7
- 🦌 Youth firearm: Oct. 7 and 8
- 🦌 Gun hunt for hunters with disabilities: Oct. 7-15
- 🦌 November gun deer hunt: Nov. 18-26
- 🦌 Muzzleloader hunt: Nov. 27-Dec. 6
- 🦌 Statewide December antlerless-only hunt, for all weapon types: Dec. 7-10
- 🦌 Antlerless-only Holiday Hunt, for all weapon types in units where offered: Dec. 24-Jan. 1

What's new this year?

- 🦌 As of Sept. 21, deer carcass tags are no longer required or issued. Instead, hunters will be issued a harvest authorization number, which must be entered into the GameReg system when registering a deer.
- 🦌 North of Highway 64, ground blinds and tree stands may be left out overnight on DNR-managed lands.
- 🦌 The antlerless-only Holiday Hunt will be held in select Deer Management Units, Dec. 24-Jan. 1.
- 🦌 There are changes this year for where baiting and feeding are allowed. For updated information, check www.dnr.wi.gov, keywords "baiting and feeding."

Get licensed

You can choose from three general license types or select a license package that suits your needs.

At the time of purchasing a deer hunting license, the hunter will no longer receive carcass tags. Instead, their license will include a list of authorization numbers that indicate what type of deer may be harvested and the zone, unit and land type where the authorizations are valid.

- 🦌 Gun Deer License (legal firearm, bow or crossbow during a firearm season only). This includes one gun buck harvest authorization and Farmland (Zone 2) antlerless harvest authorization(s).
- 🦌 Crossbow License (crossbow only). This includes one bow buck harvest authorization and Farmland (Zone 2) antlerless authorization(s).
- 🦌 Archer License (bow only). This includes one bow buck authorization and Farmland (Zone 2) antlerless authorization(s).

Note that hunters who purchase both an archer and a crossbow license will receive only one set of harvest authorizations. Buy licenses and print authorizations through Go Wild (online at gowild.wi.gov), at a license agent (a \$2 processing fee may apply for printing) or at a DNR service center. For locations, visit dnr.wi.gov and search "service centers."

When purchasing a license, proof of hunter education is required for those born on or after Jan. 1, 1973, unless participating in the hunting mentorship program or unless the hunter has completed military basic training.

Carcass tags no longer issued

Carcass tags are no longer issued. Instead, hunters are issued harvest authorization numbers at the time of license purchase. Three main harvest authorization types are offered, but hunters may be eligible for one or more of the other antlerless harvest authorization types listed in the deer hunting regulations.

- Buck authorization: included with each license, weapon-specific (bow/crossbow or gun) and valid in any Deer Management Unit statewide.
- Farmland (Zone 2) antlerless harvest authorization: included with each deer license (though not all DMUs may offer them), not weapon-specific. In Go Wild or at point of sale, choose a Farmland (Zone 2) DMU that has authorizations available, then choose a land type (public-access or private) for each authorization.
- Bonus antlerless authorizations: not included with a license and not weapon-specific. The cost for each authorization is \$12 for residents, \$20 for non-residents and \$5 for youth ages 10 and 11. Bonus antlerless authorizations are sold at the rate of one per hunter per day until sold out. In Go Wild or at point of sale, choose a DMU, zone and land type where authorizations are available.

Registration required

All deer harvested must be registered electronically through GameReg by 5 p.m. the day after recovery. Have your harvest authorization number handy to enter at the start of the registration process.

Once your deer has been successfully registered, you will receive a 10-character confirmation number for your records. For white-tailed deer, all confirmation numbers begin with "W" and are issued in the format W12-345-6789.

Registration methods include:

- Register online at gamereg.wi.gov (the fastest and easiest method), available 24 hours a day.
- Register by phone at 1-844-426-3734 (1-844-GAMEREG), also available 24 hours. When prompted, enter into your keypad the three-digit number corresponding to the county of kill. For example, for Adams County enter A-D-A by pressing "232." Find the numbers corresponding to the first three letters of each county at dnr.wi.gov, keyword "GameReg."
- Register in person. Find a station that offers a phone or computer for completing electronic registration at dnr.wi.gov, keywords "registration stations," or by calling 888-936-7463.

Chronic Wasting Disease

Wisconsin's deer need your help! To get your deer tested for CWD, visit dnr.wi.gov and search "CWD sampling" for a list of sampling stations. If you hunt in a CWD-affected area, search keyword "CWD" for special baiting/feeding and carcass transportation restrictions.

What else to know

Know where you are hunting. Information required for proper harvest authorization use and harvest registration includes:

- Zone: Forest/Zone 1 or Farmland/Zone 2.
- Deer Management Unit: This is the county, in most cases, but also know if you are hunting within the boundaries of a designated metro sub-unit.
- Land type: public-access or private.

Have proof of hunting license. Carry one or more of the following: a paper copy, a department-approved PDF displayed on a mobile device, an authenticated Wisconsin driver's license or a Go Wild Conservation Card.

For group hunting, know which rules apply and which harvest authorizations are valid. See page 22 of the Deer Hunting Regulations for details.

