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Introduction

It's that time of year again, and if you are like we are, the start of the deer hunting season is a welcome break from the turmoil that has defined 2020, and what is hopefully the near end of a difficult year for most of us. Those that have viewed our <u>2020 Hunting Digest</u> have noticed there are quite a few regulation changes in place this year.

These changes reflect the evolution of deer hunting in Michigan. The last 20 years have resulted in dramatic and sustained declines in hunter numbers. When combined with an abundant and resilient deer herd that continues to grow, and the added challenge of managing deer diseases, we felt a change that represented this changing dynamic was necessary. The changes in regulations take into consideration these three factors and should translate to rules that are easier to understand, improve flexibility in how your licenses can be used, and provide more value with your licenses than you have experienced before.

Declining Hunter Numbers and Deer Harvest Trends

To understand how we arrived at this point, you should understand where we have come from and the challenges on the horizon for deer management in Michigan and other states. First and foremost, Michigan is experiencing tremendous declines in hunter numbers. In 1998, Michigan had a record deer harvest with approximately 598,000 deer taken by hunters. That year, there were approximately 837,000 deer hunters participating in Michigan's deer seasons.

Just 20 years later in 2018, 361,000 deer were harvested by approximately 554,000 hunters. In that 20 years, Michigan lost nearly 300,000 deer hunters. If each deer hunter in 2018 was successful at harvesting one deer, they still would not have come close to matching the record set just 20 years previously.

Additionally, Michigan will lose over 100,000 deer hunters over the next decade as more hunters continue to leave the sport, largely due to the fact that older hunters are aging out of the sport, and young people are less likely to participate in hunting due to societal changes. This decline in hunters is not unique to Michigan, as states all over the country are facing the same challenges. The reasons for hunter decline are likely varied and complex, but there is one certainty—those hunters are not coming back.

When combined with the fact that only about 50% of hunters are successful at taking one deer, 15% take two or more deer, and only 4% take three or more deer, it's easy to see that overall harvest is likely

to decline, and our ability to control the growth of Michigan's deer population will become a more distant reality.

Managing Deer Disease

Hunter decline is not the only challenge facing modern day deer management. Transmissible diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD) and bovine tuberculosis (TB) represent immediate threats to Michigan's deer herd and cattle industry, respectively. CWD is widespread throughout Montcalm County and Northeast Kent County, and has been identified in Clinton, Dickinson, Eaton, Gratiot, Ingham, Ionia, and Jackson Counties.

Though the disease is here to stay, keeping it from spreading into new locations from existing disease locations is likely the new definition of CWD management success. With defined population impacts demonstrated in research projects from the Western U.S. where the disease has been identified for decades, everyone interested in sustainable deer management should be on the same side in preventing the spread of this disease.

TB does not get nearly get as much publicity as CWD nationally because Michigan has the unfortunate distinction of being the only state where TB is established in its deer herd. However, the economic ramifications for TB are and can be substantial. TB, which is a bacterial disease, persists in deer and can spread to cattle, and vice versa, sustaining its presence in both populations. Efforts to keep TB out of cattle herds have been extensive, but additional herds seem to contract the disease each year.

If herd infections were to intensify, Michigan could have its TB status downgraded in all or part of the state - an impact that would likely cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Though early efforts to reduce prevalence were successful in the mid-1990's, prevalence in DMU 452 (the core area) has never dipped below 1% and has been over 2% each of the last 5 years. Eradication of TB remains a statewide goal.

Regulation Changes for 2020

Hopefully, this provides some context in understanding some of the regulation changes for 2020. One of the biggest changes that was made is that hunters with a deer or combination license may now take an antierless deer on any of those tags in the firearm and muzzleloader seasons in the Lower Peninsula.

This regulation already has been in effect in 11 counties (DMU 487 and the five county CWD core), so some hunters are already familiar with this regulation. It is unlikely that this regulation change will result in a massive increase of antlerless deer being taken and it should help stabilize overall harvest as hunters continue to leave the sport over the coming years. It also provides a lot more value to each license for every hunter and gives greater flexibility in how hunters may choose to use their license. It also provides the opportunity for hunters to be more mobile throughout the state with their hunting efforts. Furthermore, deer and combination licenses may be used in the early and late antlerless season, expanding the opportunity for hunters to use these licenses.

Another big change was to the muzzleloader and late antierless seasons. This change will not impact any Upper Peninsula hunters, but Northern Lower Peninsula hunters will now have late antierless season open a full week earlier than before, again providing additional opportunity for pursuing deer.

In the southern Lower Peninsula (Oceana, Newaygo, Mecosta, Isabella, Midland, and Bay counties and south), the muzzleloader season has been reduced by seven days, however, the seven days have been added to the late antierless season, so there is no loss of opportunity, but rather a change in where and what you can pursue. It is also worth noting that during this season in these southern counties, hunters can pursue any legal deer with a muzzleloader on public land. This is the result of an amendment passed by our Natural Resources Commission.

Hunters in the southern Lower Peninsula can now use any legal firearm during the muzzleloader season. This regulation has been in place in 19 counties (The CWD Management Zone) the last couple of years. In that time, we saw increased participation and increased antlerless harvest during the muzzleloader season, reversing a trend nearly 20 years in the making. Though these trends are beneficial and show that more individuals are participating in these seasons (and being successful) we do not expect negative population level impacts on the deer resource. Over two years with this regulation in place in 19 counties, antlerless harvest during the muzzleloader season increased by about 3,000 deer, far less than one deer per square mile.

There are many other regulation changes that have been passed, all of which are unlikely to yield impacts in terms of deer population management, but that afford additional opportunities to many individuals. For one, people who are deaf can now participate in the Liberty and Independence Hunts. Also, hunters under the age of 17 or hunters hunting with an apprentice license are exempt from antler point restrictions on any tag, during any season, and in any location in Michigan. This allows our youngest and most inexperienced hunters the opportunity to take any antlered deer that aligns with their personal values.

Hunters throughout most of the Upper Peninsula now can resume taking antierless deer during the archery season on the deer or deer combination license, a privilege that has not been available for nearly five years. Only select DMUs in the western U.P. remain closed for antierless opportunities with archery equipment.

Regional Deer Forecast

Upper Peninsula

Overall, the Upper Peninsula deer herd seemed to fare well during last year's winter. This coupled with a good spring and excellent summer growing season has most areas reporting more deer sightings than last year. Field staff are anticipating a slightly better hunting season this year than last.

While soft mast (berries, apples, etc.) appears spotty across the region likely due to late frost conditions this past spring, the hard mast (nuts, acorns, etc.), particularly acorns, appears to be excellent in those areas with oak trees. Hunters should be on the lookout for oak trees producing acorns and invest time determining if deer have trails near these areas.

If you are an archery hunter please keep in mind that you are now allowed to harvest an antierless deer with your deer or deer combination license during the bow season except in the following deer management units: 027, 031, 036, 042, 066, 127 and 131.

Northern Lower Peninsula

Last winter had little to no impact on deer numbers in the northern Lower Peninsula. Deer numbers appear high across much of the region. Antler development and body size look exceptionally good this year, likely due to mild winter conditions and good natural forage being available during the spring and summer.

Soft mast appears spotty, but the acorn production seems quite good throughout the region in areas with oak trees. Hunters can anticipate an even better hunting season this year than last year, weather permitting.

Hunters should be aware of new regulation changes. All Lower Peninsula deer management units are now open to the early and late antierless firearm seasons. Additionally, hunters in all deer management units may harvest an antierless deer with your single deer license or deer combination license during the early and late antierless seasons as well as the firearm and muzzleloading seasons.

Southern Lower Peninsula

The winter in southern Michigan was very mild and likely had no impact on the deer herd. Deer numbers appear to be quite high and large bachelor groups have already been seen across much of the region. Field staff are anticipating a higher harvest this year in comparison with last year.

Hard mast appears spotty in the south but soft mast production of apple and pear seems very good. Staff recommend seeking out wild apple and pear trees and feel that hunters will be more successful in these places. Antler development and body size look very good and overall numbers of fawns is very high.

In the southern Lower Peninsula, hunters may harvest an antlerless deer with their deer or deer combination deer license during the early and late antlerless seasons as well as during the firearm and muzzleloading seasons. Also, the muzzleloading season is now open to all legal firearms in Zone 3 in Oceana, Newaygo, Mecosta, Isabella, Midland, Bay, and all remaining southern counties in southern Michigan.

Finally, muzzleloaders can be used on public lands in Zone 3 in Oceana, Newaygo, Mecosta, Isabella, Midland, Bay, and all remaining southern counties during the late antlerless firearm season to take any deer with a valid tag. Late antlerless season is still a private land ONLY hunt everywhere but Zone 3 and public lands may only be used by those hunting with a muzzleloader.

Preparing for the 2020 Season

The 2020 deer season is fast approaching. Hopefully, you have been out planning, preparing, and refining your strategy all year long for the upcoming season. If you have, give yourself a pat on the back because you have earned it. If you are like the rest of us, we have a few things to think about to get ready for the season.

Talk to a biologist

Your local biologist is a wealth of information. Biologists not only have a broad knowledge of deer behavior and ecology from the scientific point of view, but they are also in tune with the local area and factors that may influence deer.

Find your local biologist here.

Contact your local soil conservation district

Do you have a food plot or planting that did not fare as well as you had hoped this year that could use a boost for next year? Even though we are on the eve of the 2020 deer season it is never too early to set things in motion for a great growing season in 2021. One of the best places to figure out where to start, or what the next step should be, is your local soil conservation district.

Find your local soil conservation district here.

Scouting

Scouting probably has the biggest impact on success. If you are unsure what you are looking for, or how to go about it, scouting can seem like a daunting task. That said, no matter how large or small the property you are hunting, keen observation and understanding of how and why deer move on that landscape is important. Even making an adjustment of a couple feet here or there can make all the difference in success.

Scouting: Digital maps

There are several tools out there to digitally gain mapping information. Some of the most well-known navigation tools like Google Maps can give you a bird's eye view of places you plan to hunt. There are also tools available that show you where private/public land boundaries are. If you are hunting public land in Michigan a great, free tool is Mi-Hunt. Mi-Hunt is a digital tool that has a ton of information stored in "layers." Mi-Hunt provides everything from public/private land boundaries, satellite imagery and cover types (upland, lowland, oaks etc.) to trails, topography and more.

Find the Mi-Hunt digital map tool <u>here</u>.

Scouting: Terrain

Whether reading a map or observing on the ground, knowing the terrain can help uncover where a deer is likely to move. Land features that help provide protection, assist in giving their nose an advantage or that lead to an absence of human pressure can all influence a deer to move one way or the next. Learning to read those features can take time but is worth the effort. Some popular terrain features to keep an eye out for are ridges and saddles. A ridge is simply an elevated portion of terrain that extends out like a finger. Deer will often parallel these land features at various elevation points depending on the scenario. A saddle is simply an area between ridges that creates a depression or low point, often between valleys. Like with most factors revolving around deer, there are also many other terrain features that a deer may utilize. The key is to start familiarizing yourself with the terrain to help make sense of the deer movement in the area you are hunting.

onX, a popular digital map tool, has topographic map terrain feature illustration resource here.

Scouting: Ground Truthing

No matter how much time you spend on digital map scouting, it always pays to get on the ground and see what the terrain really looks like. If you have the time to get out ahead of the season, you can both be sure your map interpretations are correct and look to find evidence that areas of interest have visible signs of present or past deer movement.

Scouting: Bedding and feeding

Understanding deer bedding and feeding will uncover deer travel patterns. As straight forward as that statement is, figuring out the specifics can take a bit of work. Deer are adaptable and will bed in a variety of environments if they feel it is secure. Bedding locations can be found in the middle of cattail swamps or on the edge of an idle field fence line. The important part is getting out and identifying those locations. As adaptable creatures, deer will also eat a variety of food sources. Depending on factors like the time of year, food abundance, proximity to security and the like, deer may choose one food source over the other. Deer could be feeding on anything from recently forested aspen trees to grain in large agriculture fields and many items in between. The important part is figuring out what types of food are in your area and how that relates back to bedding areas. Another thing to key in on is the areas of habitat "edge" between these bedding and feeding areas. Habitat edges are areas of habitat that transition from one type to the next. These areas are important to deer and can concentrate a lot of activity.

Scouting: Finding the sign

Deer Trails

Deer trails are telltale signs that give a look into habitual activity. A deer trail is a narrow trail of varying degrees of wear depending on how well traveled it is. If you see what appears to be a narrow trail in Michigan, and it isn't a walking trail, it is likely a deer trail. One thing to keep in mind is that time of year can dictate some of that trail use activity. You may find a very freshly worn trail in summer that may not be all that active when a food source changes, or some other seasonal factor is introduced. Trying to understand how a particular trail may connect some of the food, cover or terrain previously discussed can help narrow down some likely spots of interest. Looking for trail intersections, where multiple trails come together or cross, can also be a good way to key in on spot to consider. If you want to get a better idea what may be coming down those trails and when they are coming, you can purchase a trail camera and set it up along the trail.

Rubs and scrapes

Depending on the time of year bucks will also leave telltale signs by making rubs and scrapes. A "rub" is simply a tree that has bark rubbed off by antlers of a deer. These start to show up in large part later in October and into November timed with rut activity. Although it can be debated how much stock to put into rubs, they do tell a story of guaranteed past activity. Also be on the lookout for rubs that form a line. A rub line is a series of rubbed trees that form a line that follows a line of travel. Scrapes, on the other hand, are cleared areas of bare dirt that deer also make in that late October early November timeframe. These are viewed as more consistent opportunities for repeat visits from deer, particularly bucks. Some scrapes may be just a one-time occurrence, or they can be communal areas that are frequented often by many deer. Even if you are not in that magic window of fresh activity, you may be able to detect last year's activity which could be similar to the current year.

Picking a spot

Once you have put together more and more pieces of the puzzle, it will be time to find a spot to sit. You may be looking for a place to set up a tree stand for the season or simply just identifying a place to setup the day of your hunt with a ground blind. Ideally you will try and find a spot close enough for a comfortable shot in the area a deer will likely travel, while still remaining concealed. Keep in mind the predominate wind (in Michigan, absent any unique terrain influencing wind direction, it is generally out

of the west) to make sure that your location will be downwind of that area you expect to have a deer travel. Another successful strategy is to make note of the location of the stand in proximity to where you expect to see deer travel and note the wind direction to be sure you hunt that stand on days the wind will be blowing away from that area.

Scent control and pressure

Scouting and spending time figuring out why, how and where deer travel is infinitely important. The more time you invest the better. However, your presence also has an impact. Each area is a little different on the dynamics of how much human activity will be tolerated, but as a rule each time you are in the deer's environment you are increasing their awareness and wariness. This can be true of scouting and of hunting a single location often. The safe bet is usually to play it safe and don't visit areas you are actively hunting or plan to hunt any more than necessary. It is always a balancing act. To avoid deer figuring out your pattern instead of the other way around, a method that is increasing in popularity is the "hang and hunt." The hang and hunt method involves identifying the area or trees you would like to come back to and setting up the stand when you hunt. This premise is built around selecting many areas to hunt and not being selective to one area. If hunting a small tract of land this method likely does not make sense. If you are venturing out onto larger properties or some of the over 8 million acres of publicly accessible hunting ground in Michigan this could be something to consider.

Review the current regulations

Be sure to check up on the latest hunting regulations in your area, which may influence your strategy.

Find the 2020 Michigan hunting digest here.

Get afield

The most important thing you can do this fall is get out in Michigan's great outdoors and enjoy the deer season. There is one guarantee, that there is always something to be learned. There is no substitute for time spent afield.

Conclusion

We hope that you have a safe and enjoyable hunting season. It had been a unique year, and unfortunately those impacts will likely be seen for some time. Regardless of what changes have been experienced or what might be on the horizon, the 2020 deer season is shaping up to be another great one here in Michigan. Whatever your goal is for deer hunting, whether it's a trophy rack, a freezer full of venison, reconnecting with friends and family, or simply isolating and being one with nature, we hope you find your goals fulfilled at season's end.