**Showcasing the DNR: An open letter to Michigan’s deer hunters**

***Preface note:*** *With the understanding that a majority of readers of this article will be deer hunters, some of what is going to be said might not sit well. But these are things that need to be stated for the betterment of management of our deer herd into the future.*

**By CHAD STEWART**

**Deer, elk and moose management specialist**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

The 2023 Michigan deer hunting season is about ready to kick off, and we need to have some frank conversations about deer management in this state. Primarily, our deer seasons aren’t impacting our deer herd like many may think. If you are in the Lower Peninsula, we simply aren’t taking enough does during the season to control the growth of our deer herd in many areas.

**Comparative harvest**

Since 2000, do you know how many years we have harvested more antlerless deer than antlered deer in the state of Michigan? The answer is one. In 2009, we had an estimated antlerless harvest of 220,913 and an estimated antlered harvest of 215,104. Every other year in this century, we’ve taken more antlered deer than antlerless deer. If you make a quick comparison with the states around us, such as Illinois, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin, they all typically harvest between 8% to 25% more antlerless deer than they do antlered deer in a given year. Using those measures, we should be harvesting between 43,000 and 68,000 more antlerless deer in the Lower Peninsula alone!

While this sounds like a lot, keep in mind that the Lower Peninsula has about 40,000 square miles of land. While not every square mile is created equally, and some of those square miles won’t hold any deer due to intensive development or other factors that make the land unappealing to deer, one can see that such an increase in total harvest CAN be achievable, especially in areas where deer are abundant.

Furthermore, the gap between antlered and antlerless take seems to be widening. Our antlerless harvest has decreased by about 28% from the early 2000s to today. Our antlered harvest, for comparison, has only declined about 11% over this time, likely because of the decreased hunter numbers, not a declining deer herd.

Taking on average about 1 to 1.5 additional antlerless deer per square mile in the Lower Peninsula can improve our overall management, help balance our adult sex ratios and even improve the quality of the bucks that we see. The current trend we are experiencing is simply not sustainable for long-term deer management in Michigan.

**Benefits to deer management**

Let’s first talk about what additional antlerless harvest means in terms of management. First and foremost, if hunters are filling their freezers with antlerless deer, especially early in the season, it can provide a tremendous benefit to your current-year and future years’ deer herd.

Intense doe harvest early in the season can help balance out the buck-to-doe ratio prior to the rut, which can intensify the rutting activity you see. If you think about having a lot of does on the landscape with fewer bucks, the competition for breeding can be greatly reduced, since many of these does are coming into estrous around the same time.

On the other hand, picture a deer herd where the buck and doe herd are more in balance, and that means when a doe in estrous comes by your stand, it’s followed by two or three bucks. The level of excitement you can experience during the rut can be greatly improved.

However, the typical Michigan hunting philosophy to date is to hold off on taking antlerless deer until later in the season. With online reporting, we now have the advantage of seeing how deer harvests change over time and within seasons.

Last year, excluding the early antlerless weekend, Michigan hunters didn’t take more antlerless deer than antlered deer in a given day until after Thanksgiving, specifically Nov. 25. This means that nearly two-thirds of the deer season, and probably close to 80-90% of hunters’ efforts, was over before hunters began really focusing on antlerless deer. Data supports this, as over 37% of all antlerless deer reported taken in 2022 came after Thanksgiving, compared to only 9% of all antlered deer taken during this time.

Of course, it’s possible that taking those does early in the year might impact your success at taking a buck. But I am asking hunters to consider the long-term benefits of being selective in their choice of taking a buck, even if that means not taking a buck in the upcoming year. If we could get hunters to rethink their philosophy of “get your buck and then wait for a bigger buck to show up later in the season,” we would see marked improvement in our buck age structure and more balanced sex ratios.

To be fair, the mentality for many Michigan deer hunters has improved in recent years. The number of hunters taking the first buck they see probably represents a smaller percentage of Michigan hunters than most think. You might be surprised to know that nearly two-thirds of bucks reported harvested in Michigan last year had antlers with at least one side with four points on it. But for those looking to shoot any buck early in the year, consider how much time you have left in your season and what your local deer population looks like before making that decision. The choice to shoot a doe instead of that young buck could help improve your hunting both in the current year as well as in the coming years.

**Changes promoting antlerless take**

There are a host of regulations that the DNR has attempted in recent years to improve antlerless harvest, and some that have been considered but not yet attempted.

First and foremost, in the Lower Peninsula, hunters have been able to use either tag on their combo license to take an antlerless deer during the firearm or muzzleloader seasons. This regulation change was made back in 2020 after realizing that nearly 65% of Michigan hunters did not purchase an antlerless license. This means that our most participated-in season, firearm season, had nearly two out of three hunters ineligible to shoot an antlerless deer! This change gives everyone in the Lower Peninsula an opportunity to shoot an antlerless deer and allows hunters to be selective in their harvest decisions and to take a shot at that mature doe during the firearm season without the added burden of purchasing an extra antlerless license. And EVERYONE knows that doe – the one that kept out of range in the bow season while alerting every other deer to avoid your general location!

The option to use one of your combo license tags on an antlerless deer instead of a younger buck is meant to help balance our deer herd and give hunters purchasing the deer and combo licenses greater flexibility than ever before with how they want to use those licenses to manage their deer herd.

Hunters can even use their unused deer or deer combo licenses to take an antlerless deer during the late antlerless season if their efforts to harvest a deer came up unsuccessful during the earlier hunting seasons.

Speaking of antlerless licenses, another change in the past couple of years has again given flexibility with how these licenses can be used. No longer do you have to enter a drawing to get your antlerless license. Nor do you have to purchase an additional doe license to go hunt at your cabin or a friend’s farm because they are in a different unit than where you hunt the rest of the year. Each antlerless license is good for private and public land across the entirety of the Lower Peninsula. Just ensure you have permission, purchase your license and go hunting. It’s literally that easy.

While the changes to the deer and combo license allowing antlerless deer to be taken in the firearm and muzzleloader season and the change in our antlerless license structure are two of the more notable changes made to manage our deer herd, there are other topics that regularly come up as well. Antler point restrictions, a “one buck” rule, “earn a buck” (the idea that a hunter has to harvest an antlerless deer before being eligible to take a buck) and changing the opening date of firearm season from the traditional Nov. 15 to instead falling on a weekend are all options frequently pitched to help alter the course of management.

In the interest of brevity, each one of these topics could have both benefits and baggage associated with it, which is best suited to be addressed on its own in a separate article. But, after looking at data on each topic, a simple shift to any of these topics is unlikely to result in the impact to antlerless harvest needed to effectively manage our Lower Peninsula deer herd.

**U.P. exception**

While a majority of this article has been spent on the high deer numbers in our Lower Peninsula, it’s worth mentioning that in the Upper Peninsula, we have a very different scenario unfolding. While antlerless harvest needs to be increased in some areas of the U.P., in other areas, our deer herd exists at low densities. Despite areas with low deer densities, the allowance of antlerless deer harvest is possible. Research has shown that at low densities, hunters have minimal impact on deer populations, which prevents populations from crashing due to hunting.

Because of the differences in deer density across the Upper Peninsula, we have implemented a tiered system with how antlerless licenses can be used.

In the southern part of the U.P., antlerless licenses can be used similarly to how they are used in the Lower Peninsula. In these units, winter is often milder and deer numbers are abundant. Even in some areas with low deer numbers, the impact of these licenses being available often translates to less than one antlerless deer harvested per square mile.

Across much of the central U.P., we have developed larger, similarly managed units with limited antlerless lotteries. Hunters can put in for a permit to use their universal antlerless license for either Deer Management Unit 351 in the east or Unit 352 in the west part of the region. Only 1,000 of these permits are available this year in each unit, and if history is any indication, harvest attributed to antlerless licenses in these units totals less than 400 across these 6,600 square miles.

Finally, in the far west of the U.P. and along the Lake Superior shore, antlerless harvest is again prohibited.

**Changing philosophy**

I understand that many hunters may be reading this and have reservations about changing their philosophy regarding antlerless harvest for fear of dropping a deer population too low.

If you find yourself in this camp, let me share some data that we use to make our deer harvest decisions. The first is the forecast of hunters we have in Michigan, which is expected to fall to around 450,000 by 2030, down from the nearly 800,000 deer hunters we had in 2000.

It’s also worth noting that our data shows that 75% of hunters don’t take an antlerless deer, while only 17% of hunters take one antlerless deer in a season. Less than 1% of hunters take four or more deer in a season. So, the fear of hurting your deer population by removing another antlerless deer because your neighbor takes too many is probably, in most cases, unfounded. Chances are your neighbor isn’t taking very many antlerless deer either, so you won’t be negatively impacting your herd by taking an extra doe or two.

Because of our lower hunter numbers and our continued unwillingness to shoot an antlerless deer, we are shooting far fewer antlerless deer than we have historically. That means that we have much room for improvement in terms of overall antlerless deer harvest across much of our state.

**The other side**

Finally, it’s important to look at the other side of deer management.

Most hunters are happy seeing a lot of deer, but when there are a lot of deer in an area, the level of conflicts associated with these deer can be incredibly detrimental to hunters and nonhunters alike.

This past year was probably a record year in terms of the number of damage complaints our department received from farmers, and associated crop damage. Some of this may be exacerbated by the spring drought we saw across much of the state, but the fact remains that deer numbers as they currently exist are taking a toll on our farmers.

The way our agency mitigates this damage is to provide out-of-season permits so those landowners experiencing damage can help protect their crops and livelihood. Since very few hunters like the idea of deer being shot out of season, we hunters need to do better at controlling deer numbers in the hunting seasons to limit the impacts of deer on agricultural yields in the summer.

The other impact often associated with high deer numbers is the number of deer-vehicle collisions. According to traffic crash data, in 2022 there were nearly 59,000 reported deer-vehicle collisions, the highest number since 2009. Nearly 20% of the recorded collisions in Michigan involved a white-tailed deer.

**The bottom line**

So, hunters, we simply need to do better with antlerless deer harvest.

Our harvest decisions we make between October and December can improve our deer herd, influence safety on our roads, support our farmers and benefit our forests.

We need to quickly, and substantially, increase our antlerless deer harvest across much of our Lower Peninsula.

Our reputation as conservationists may be defined by it!

[Learn more about deer management in Michigan](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/wildlife/deer).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRStories). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNREmail](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNREmail).

###