

Deer Management

Hunter Involvement Required

By Tony Nette



Extended periods of deep snow, rather than cold temperatures, define severity of winter as it relates to deer in Nova Scotia. There is no better example of how deer are directly affected by snow, than the winter of 2000-2001.

Snow that fell in November 2000, lasted well into April, the following spring. The usual winter rains of the January-March period fell as additional snow. This excess snow made travelling extremely difficult for deer and covered much of their food. During the winter/spring assessment period (February 1 through May 31), 397 deer were checked for physical condition. The results were shocking. At least 65 per cent of the fawns and 47 per cent of the yearlings had starved to death. Mature bucks, who enter winter in poor condition after the rut, did no better than yearlings.

The consequence of that winter not only reduced deer numbers through direct starvation, but removed most of what should have been prime breeders in the years to come. The ability of the herd to bounce back to former numbers had been compromised. Recovery would be slow even if a series of mild winters were to follow. However, the situation for deer would worsen even more, especially on Cape Breton Island, with deep snowfalls in the following winters.

An exception to the province-wide deep snows, occurred along the coastal area of Lunenburg and Bridgewater. In this area warm winds from the Gulf Stream reduced snow levels. The local deer herd, already causing problems for farmers, gardeners and highway traffic, had little snow to cope with and numbers continued to increase.

Because this coastal area is well developed with towns, subdivisions, farms, and roads, hunters had not focussed their efforts in the area to take advantage of the high deer numbers. Think of it, as a hunter, would you prefer to hunt in a more natural woodland setting, or hunt near a town where you can hear dogs barking, doors slamming and cars going by? Additionally, there is the matter of numerous small land holdings and getting permission to hunt on these "occupied" properties. Most hunters prefer the more natural setting despite reduced chances of taking a deer.

The Department of Natural Resources was faced with the rising frustration of area residents with a high number of deer, and only a limited ability to use hunting as a tool to reduce deer numbers. With no other effective means of controlling deer numbers, hunting remained the most reasonable approach. However, hunters had to be attracted to the area by providing more incentive. The deer management zone system provided the means.

In 2003 a new zone, 2A, was established in the area. Within this smaller zone, 500 permits to take antlerless deer were issued in addition to the province-wide open buck hunt. Five hundred permits seemed high in terms of the number of hunters focussed in this relatively small area, but certainly not high in terms of a deer harvest objective for the area. Before deciding on the number, area residents were advised of the situation and given an opportunity to provide input. The most common feedback received was, "get rid of these deer!"

The fall 2003 hunt was a success in one respect. There were few, if any, complaints of hunters being a nuisance or hunting in an unsafe manner. That in itself is a tribute to considerate and safety conscious hunters. However, of the 223 deer taken from the area, only 90 were antlerless. Obviously hunters had ample opportunity to select a buck and there is a deep seated preference by hunters to bring home antlers, in addition to meat for the table.

This fall the number of antlerless permits will be increased to 750 and hunters will be encouraged to take an antlerless deer as opposed to a buck. If this proves ineffective, other regulatory options such as designating the zone "shotgun only," will be considered. This is a common practice in other jurisdictions to address high deer numbers in developed areas. Issuing tags specific to Zone 2A that would restrict the hunter to taking only an antlerless deer, or increasing the bag limit within Zone 2A are other possible approaches to alleviate the situation.

However, before any further changes are made, the effectiveness of the current approach must be assessed. Have we been successful in reducing deer numbers in Zone 2A? How do we measure success? Hunter kill may not be indicative of changing deer numbers. Consideration has been given to evening roadside surveys which have been used elsewhere in urban settings, or increasing the number of Pellet Group Index survey plots within the new zone. Each of these options are labour intensive and should be completed shortly after the snow melts in spring...a busy time when staff are already stretched to the limit.

The solution is to once again utilize hunters. This year, each hunter who receives an antlerless deer stamp for Zone 2A will be asked to complete a short questionnaire.

The observations and success of these hunters (hours of effort required to take a deer) will provide considerable data to determine relative abundance of deer from year to year. This approach requires little staff time and a minimum budget to obtain relevant data. Hunters will assist in addressing the community problem of too many deer while providing data required to assess the effectiveness of the hunt.

The situation in Zone 2A is a good example hunters as a component of deer management.

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Top: Deer-proof garden enclosure fence, Lunenburg County.

Left: High deer numbers often result in increased road kills.