Harvesting Does Early

The opening day of the Texas deer hunting season is unquestionably a highly anticipated event. For those youngsters entering the wild lands of Texas for the first time, it is one of life's unforgettable events. Yet to the veteran sportsmen, it may represent a window of opportunity to micromanage their time and get some things done they do not want to perform later in the season when an increase in big buck activity is expected to occur. Some of their activities may include camp and blind maintenance while actual hunting time is spent scouting for areas they intend to visit during the rut. But for some of the more management-oriented hunters, those first few weeks are spent satisfying one of the major requirements of deer management—shooting does.

Although the harvest of surplus doe is gaining in popularity, it often remains on the back burner for some individuals simply because it takes effort. For others it has become an obsession to satisfy their harvest objective as early in the season as possible. By doing so, they not only leave more native forage for the remaining deer, but they free up their time during the rut so they can focus solely on bucks.

The fact that a balanced sex ratio is not only more natural but an accepted principle has changed the way hunters think of does. Today sportsmen are more management oriented. Not only do they want to see larger-racked bucks, they want to participate in the development of those antlers. And by removing an adequate number of doe, they are doing just that as they spend those first few weeks of the season satisfying both their management and nutritional requirements.

When it comes to harvesting does, it's not hard to decide whether the doe you are looking at is the right one to shoot or not, at least for some people. I personally believe

that the right doe is the one that remains stationary long enough for you to put the crosshairs on her shoulder. Why? Because there is simply no proven selective process as to what an inferior vs. superior doe is.

The removal of an adequate number of does on a lightly hunted area is not very difficult because the sex ratio will normally favor doe, and more importantly the females are naïve. They are visible, making them relatively easy targets. It is during this initial phase of harvest that one could possibly consider a discretionary harvest of doe, but even then what physical traits could be used in the selection process?

One physical characteristic could be body size. Since most would agree that a large-bodied doe would be more prone to raising larger-bodied male offspring, large does could be protected. However, even when it comes to the larger-bodied doe, there remains no guarantee that her fawns will be any healthier or develop larger antlers than those born to a small-bodied doe. Unfortunately, there is no insurance how or to what extent the individual doe you are critiquing genetically contributes to its offspring. In reality, it may be more important to consider where the doe resides.

For example, if your goal is to augment antler size on the bucks inhabiting your lease or property, where you shoot does on the property could play a role in realizing that goal. In other words, there may be certain pastures or locations that you shouldn't remove does for several reasons.

First, your hunting parcel may be extremely small or situated in such a way that you may wish to afford deer some sort of sanctuary in the middle of the property to not only attract but hold deer, thus you would hunt only the periphery of the protected zone. Or, more importantly, you may have isolated locations where you consistently observe

the largest-racked bucks on the ranch and would like to augment those desirable antler qualities. One can only assume that the more does available to those impressive bucks, the greater the chance they have at reproducing those particularly desirable antler characteristics. Thus, you would protect does in such big-buck-producing areas. Thus by not shooting does on carefully selected areas, one can potentially enhance overall antler quality simply by the fact that bucks can breed more of them. This is particularly important when one considers the fact that some bucks, even those with the largest antlers, will only breed two or three doe per year while some don't breed at all.

Biologists on intensively managed landholdings attempt to circumvent this concern by employing what I call the deer management permit strategy. For those unfamiliar with a DMP, it is a state-sanctioned permit applicable only on high-fenced properties, allowing the landowner to temporarily confine a single buck along with a maximum of 20 doe in a pen (minimally five acres in size) throughout the breeding season. Basically, twenty does are randomly captured, ear-tagged, and released into the pen. The buck, however, is selected based on the size of its rack. By doing so, the chances of augmenting the buck's highly desirable phenotypic antler traits are presumably magnified. Once again, the genetic component of the doe remains questionable, but the fact that the buck breeds all 20, which it will unquestionably accomplish, managers realize a greater probability of augmenting desirable antler traits on the particular ranches they work with.

When it comes to harvest selection of does, it becomes less critical over time as the recommended quota becomes increasingly difficult to attain. The fact is, those once easy to harvest does rapidly adapt and become extremely effective at avoiding humans.

This is one of the reasons why few does are observed on well-managed areas. They're still there; they simply learn the program and begin initiating their inherent survival techniques, one of which is to avoid people. And if you think a buck is smart, you simply haven't tried to match the wits of an ole doe. A six-year-old doe that has survived the gauntlet of five or six deer hunting seasons while raising a fawn or two is an elusive critter.

The most disturbing aspect of a doe harvest is the number of buck fawns that are shot by mistake. The harvest of nubbin fawns is always a problem whenever a doe harvest is implemented, but by following several firm rules, such occurrences can be reduced substantially.

First, all doe hunting should be conducted around areas attractive to deer, such as grain fields or feeders to insure hunters time to verify their targets. Also, doe hunters should employ binoculars or a spotting scope to enhance verification of their quarry. This rule alone will substantially reduce the number of buck fawns in the harvest.

Another rule to follow is to pass over deer that appear fearless of a hunter, for this characteristic is often displayed by young males.

It is also prudent to wait until several deer come into view to help verify that your target is an adult doe and not a fawn simply by comparing body size. To an inexperienced and excited hunter, a buck fawn looks a lot like a doe. Not until an adult doe or buck shows up can a large-bodied buck fawn be properly identified.

What must be understood is the reason why does are harvested in the first place.

A landholding is capable of supporting a fixed number of animals, defined as

carrying capacity. Deer densities can be sustained at or near carrying capacity, but cannot surpass it without adversely affecting both quality of the herd and the habitat.

A controlled harvest of the female segment of the herd is a management strategy employed to maintain deer numbers in equilibrium with the environment. An adequate harvest eliminates competition, insuring all deer appropriate amounts of forage by assuaging the acute demand deer place on the native habitat.

In order to increase the number of mature bucks, a balanced sex ratio is required. By tightening the sex ratio in conjunction with a conservative buck harvest, additional bucks will be allowed to enter their maximum antler-growing years.

In areas where an excessive amount of hunting pressure has been applied on the bucks, a reduced buck harvest is recommended. So don't fall into the trap of thinking that trophy bucks will begin to appear simply because you're harvesting does. However, by carefully balancing your harvest and reducing the hunting pressure on the young bucks, you will have a good foundation for a quality deer herd.

The major problem with deer quality today has little to do with genetics. Even though the concept of balancing a deer population has been introduced years ago, sportsmen remain suppressing the buck segment of our deer herds. Everyone wants to shoot a buck—I don't blame them--but if quality deer, particularly older, larger-antlered bucks are desired, hunters must begin passing up those young bucks and focus on the doe harvest, which should be accomplished early in the season in order to enjoy their efforts later on in the rut when it really counts!!