

Harvest Lite

Great Effort, Less Deer in northland

By Dick Ellis

Saturday afternoon, I sat tight against a red pine and looked down on the giant puzzle piece of tamarack swamp that twisted and turned with the base of the bordering ridge. Final light was fading on day eight of the Wisconsin gun deer hunt, and my season. The welcome commotion of 19 family members, a long, hard hunt, Thanksgiving, sled riding, first ice walleyes, Christmas tree cutting... were only echoes. The cabin was empty. I was alone in the back country.

Two miles from the nearest Vilas County road, I caught my breath, felt the wet t-shirt stick to my skin and felt too my body temperature drop with the final minutes of daylight. The 30-06 had been cradled in my lap after a check of the scope to make sure it had not fogged over during the long pursuit through dense cover on the track of the buck.

I cracked a branch over my knee, worked the grunt call, and strained for any sound from the swamp or a wisp of gray ghost moving back to me from the tamaracks. Just yards away on the snow lay the curled bark and shavings of a sapling ripped raw by an angry buck. His fresh prints literally trampled the ridge snow among a sea of old tracks, tracing his erratic path to another small tree that had been snapped in half on the ridge. I could see him in my mind. He had been



In minus eight degrees, Jack Frost paints a beautiful picture in Vilas County on opening morning of the 2008 Gun Deer Season.

right here minutes before. Now if he would just make one mistake....

My old tennis shoes were buried in six inches of soft white, a choice for winter footwear that had caused a cabin neighbor on Island Lake to question my sanity a few hours before. But tennis shoes I know, with one pair of light socks and one pair of wool, work well for deer or pheasant hunts over a Wisconsin November or December when the goal is to take the game quietly to the hunted.

Waiting on stand had not worked since Monday. We don't bait, but I had spent 42 hours on proven stands, moving often with the portable climber to find deer. I had seen three fawns, a doe and I had passed on a 20 yard shot on a small spike on day two. Hindsight is 20-20. That same buck might not live if he showed again on day eight. Four cabin partners had collectively spent more than 100 hours on stands. Collectively, they had seen eight deer. Nothing hung from the

meat pole. One partner who often fills his tags had spent 100 hours alone on stands since the beginning of the archery season. He had seen a total of two does.

The Vilas County harvest opening weekend was down 49 percent. 133,828 deer had been taken statewide, a 22 percent decline from 2007 with the buck harvest down 25 percent statewide and the antlerless kill down 20 percent. No season harvest statistics were available November 30 on the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) website for this column.

The DNR listed very cold hunting conditions opening morning in the northern counties, a late opening weekend that missed the peak of the rutting season and poor fawn recruitment the previous spring as among the factors for low harvest. There is some speculation that hunters did not yet register their deer with the bitter cold putting no sense of urgency to that task. Flat out, I don't believe any of it. I may be wrong but I don't believe the deer are here.

We hunted in eight-below zero opening morning and stayed out on small portable platforms in trees for more than four hours. Those that did move because they were cold I think would have pushed deer to those with more perseverance. We're not tougher than your average Wisconsin hunter. We are the average Wisconsin



Dominic Calvi, 14, of West Allis, holds vigil from his northern Wisconsin deer stand in Vilas County near Maple Lake. Over three days, Dominic would see one doe and one forkhorn that would not present a shot.

north country.

“The DNR is so, so wrong with their deer herd estimates up here,” said Bear and Deer Guide Mike Foss of Washburn Sunday. “I think they made the opposite miscalculation that they made with the bear population. They said they estimated there were 13,000 bears in Wisconsin and now there may be 26,000. I think they over-estimated deer numbers. The Bayfield County harvest is down 50 percent and the surrounding three counties I believe around 26 percent.”

“180 people signed up for the buck contest at the Pub & Grub near Washburn and Wednesday there were four bucks on it. With my Cuddeback cameras out and my clients we would see deer. I saw three deer in 29 hours

over three days. You could count on two hands the number of deer that came to the only food plot in five miles since the beginning of the archery season. It’s sad for the local economy. A lot of hunters won’t be coming back to Bayfield County and those that are here won’t be shooting does.”

The final shades of gray came down on the 2008 Wisconsin gun season uneventfully. He never showed, and an eerie quiet hung over Vilas County. I had not heard even a distant shot. Another kind of eerie quiet would also be waiting in the cold, dark cabin where just one change of clothes waited on the bed.

I had a long walk out. I had a long drive home. *Wo*

sin hunter. And I think that saying cold helped restrict the harvest is a little like saying that Packer fans with the best tickets to the best game of the year stayed home because of the cold. Cold is a near non-factor.

I’m not angry. I don’t mind working for my deer and know that populations fluctuate. But “my” local deer herd is more important than venison in the freezer. Now comes the muzzleloader hunt, followed by the statewide antlerless only hunt. I will not take a doe here, based solely on what I have seen. It’s anecdotal evidence, yes, but it is a song I have heard repeatedly all week, and all season long in the



With daughter Jenny and Lori and Taylor Ellis following, Bob Johnson of Mukwonago hauls a freshly cut Christmas tree to the truck. Cutting a tree on public forest land requires a \$5.00 DNR permit.



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