

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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Octoberfest

Deer numbers high on special antlerless hunt

By Dick Ellis

With the sun still high but beginning its drop in the western skies over Rush Lake, the first deer came. A doe and two fawns emerged from an endless sea of cattails, cut the bordering stand of ash and oak and found the crop of 'rape' that had called them so early from the security of the marsh in the first place. Another doe and a lone fawn soon followed, then a spike, a fork and a third mama with offspring.

On stand Friday afternoon 200 yards from this highway heaven of venison on the edge of a woodlot overlooking the crop, I watched them come. A scoped shotgun holding slugs was ready. Binoculars focused in to scrutinize each visitor to the crop and another of red clover to the east, then scanned far reaches of the marsh for a distant glint of sunlight on antler. The camera fitted with telephoto lens hung from my neck.

I was ready on this second day of the special October, antlerless-only deer hunt, first as a reporter and then as a Wisconsin hunter. But a hunter not at all familiar with the kind of show I was being introduced to October 17th in Unit 66 west of Oshkosh. Personal preference sends this bow and rifle hunter annually to hunt the unbroken forests of the far north. Often too, I hunt nearer



George Curtis has helped preserve Wisconsin's wild places over a lifetime of work, and was named 2008 Conservation Communicator of the Year by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation.

home in the southeast with bow and arrow on public terrain of the the Kettle Moraine State Forest's northern unit near Adell. Seeing deer in those wonderful haunts is a



Deer emerge from the Rush Lake marsh to feed in crop fields late in the afternoon October 18 during the four-day special antlerless only hunt

gift. Fastening a tag is a comparatively rare gift.

Friday, I was a guest on the private property owned by my friend George Curtis.

Curtis has spent a lifetime working with federal and state organization like the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), Wisconsin DNR and the Glacial Habitat Program and the Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin to pro-

tect literally more than 1,000 of acres of personally owned land in northern and central Wisconsin from future commercial or residential development and to ensure post-sale easement rights and ongoing use of the properties by the outdoor community.

The producer of "It's Your Environment" cable television program, Curtis was named 2008 Conservation Communicator of the Year by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation for helping to educate the public about diverse issues related to conservation and the envi-



Just before a fawn enters the photo and attempts to suckle, this doe offers the writer a perfect shot at 40 yards.



Central Wisconsin has high deer numbers that the DNR wants to reduce with special season like the four day antlerless only hunt held October 16-19.

ronment, including habitat preservation, hunting safety, water quality protection and stewardship of our natural resources.

On the Curtis property Friday, Christmas came early. The 2008 Wisconsin deer population prior to any archery or firearm season harvest reports was estimated between 1.5 and 1.7 million animals. For a little while on stand, I was beginning to think maybe half of those deer were going to congregate on this back-40.

Wisconsin's October antlerless deer only gun hunt October 16 through 19 was designed to reduce deer numbers and gave hunters the opportunity to put a deer in the freezer and prequalify for Earn-a-Buck (EAB) authorization prior to the traditional November 9-day gun deer hunt. My reasons for coming to the Oshkosh area Friday were several-fold. I was more interested in photos than killing a doe but the freezer is empty and I had every intention of squeezing the trigger if given the opportunity. I wanted the new experience offered by central Wisconsin's high deer numbers. And I wanted to simply spend an afternoon in a Wisconsin treestand to take in the sights and sounds of deer fast approaching the peak of rut, or the mating season for whitetails.

In the north country, that means hunting with the bow as late on the calendar as possible prior to the scheduled gun deer hunt. I wasn't sure what I would see or hear in Unit 66 in mid-October in central Wisconsin. Ulti-

mately though, it was the whole show.

When sunset and the end of shooting hours sent me down the tree and initiated a salute of white surrender flags bounding again from the rape to the safety of the Rush Lake marsh, I had watched between 40 and 50 different whitetail deer. Maybe 12 had been bucks. Big bucks, little bucks, sparring bucks, romantic bucks rejected by not-yet-ready lady friends. You can't buy a ticket to that kind of a show.

Fawn bawls carried from the ring of trees across the property to my tree, causing adult does scattered over the field to snap to attention to see what was troubling the little one. A larger buck stayed under the safety of cover in the mature woods behind me, but his "grunting" betrayed him and I was able to find his white antlers with telephoto in the darkening woods and snap his photo.

One forkhorn continuously challenged another to spar in the center of the field, or center ring if you prefer. I would have not had known that they were bucks at all if not for the click-clattering of small antlers. A doe

not yet ready for romance rejected the advances of a mature buck. And some biggest boys who have learned to survive a season or two emerged in low light from the marsh, or hung to heavy cover until complete darkness set in.

I refrained from taking any shot throughout the afternoon, hoping instead for sparring activity camera shots near my stand. The lone doe I did elect to tag at 40 yards late in the day ruined my plans a bit when a fawn entered the scene and looked to suckle milk. Now, I know that harvesting a fawn is a good wildlife management tool; fawns will be the least likely to survive a harsh winter. I also know that fawns are old enough to survive now without mother.

But I also know the freezer can go another day or two without venison. I never did pull the trigger. But I did pull out of the Curtis property with more great memories from the Wisconsin fields. And that's one shot I'll always take. *W*