

A Number's Game

Wisconsin deer, bear and wolf populations in 2010

By Dick Ellis



A black bear sow with three yearlings was followed by the writer into the woods after crossing Highway 17 south of Rhinelander for these photos. Bear sightings are increasing as bear numbers rise in Wisconsin. (Ellis)

Traveling last week on Highway 17 south of Rhinelander, a sow and three black bear yearlings crossed 200 yards in front of the truck and posed for a photo on a hill before disappearing into the northern forest. Mama Bear wore a unique white 'V' marking on her chest. I took the first dirt road east into the woods in pursuit intent on better photos and was soon waiting out the dark crew as they peeked at me from behind a tree at 60 yards. A farm dog had other plans and crashed our party.

I thought of the black bear that stood in our cabin yard in broad daylight last fall in Vilas County. The several bears we had encountered on Newcomb Lane leading to our cabin in spring and summer. The bear that had attempted to cross the road near Clam Lake in Sawyer County during daylight hours before retreating from my approach and sitting down in the forest for my camera as if contemplating just how he was going to get by this pest standing on the road.

And I thought too of the first wolf I

had seen in the wild while deer hunting last November. Although I spend the most time in the field, I was the last in our party to encounter a wolf on the move. Before recent seasons, in fact, I had rarely encountered bears in the field either, with the exceptions of working with DNR biologists in dens with cubs to gather research data.

Last week too, on this same trip I encountered two deer on my hunting turf and took more photos. It hasn't been a frequent sight in Unit 34 and with a 59 percent decline in the deer gun harvest last year; it's a sight always welcome. You really don't know what you've got till it's gone.

Numbers of Wisconsin deer and bear and wolves surely correlate with each other at least to a degree and fluctuate for the most part based on the management decisions of man. We'll see where it all travels in 2010 as summer speeds toward September and the bear and archery seasons that start it all. But right now, there's enough chatter on the outdoor writer's wire regarding it all to keep things interesting. Here's some of the noise.

The DNR has with approval from the Natural Resources Board (NRB) has designated 66 Deer Management Unit (DMU) as regular units with traditional nine-day gun hunts with buck plus antlerless quota rules. This is an increase from 62 regular Units in 2009. According to the DNR, "Antlerless deer harvest is carefully



The DNR has designated 66 deer management units as 'regular' units for 2010 with traditional nine-day gun hunts with buck plus antlerless quota rules. Antlerless deer harvest is managed by permits in regular units. 18 regular units will have no antlerless deer permits available to deer hunters in 2010, up five from 2009. (Ellis)

managed by permits in regular units and 18 regular units will have no antlerless deer harvest permits available to deer hunters in 2010. This is up from 13 units with no antlerless permits available in 2009 and is the fastest possible way to increase herd populations in units where the herd is below established goals.”

The DNR with support of hunter groups including bowhunters is proposing eliminating harvest of antlerless deer by bowhunters in gun quota units that do not have antlerless permits available. Public hearings on this proposal are scheduled for May 17 in Rhinelander, May 18 in Fitchburg and May 24 in Green Bay. For details connect with the DNR website. For 2010, 46 DMUs are designated as Herd Control Units with deer herd number estimated to be at least 20 percent

above established goals. There is an unlimited supply of antlerless deer harvest permits available in these units, many in agricultural regions. Herd control units will also have an October 14-17 antlerless deer only gun hunt. There are 22 DMUs designated as Chronic Wasting Disease Management Units in 2010. These units have unlimited earn-a-buck rules and will be included in the October 14-17 antlerless only hunt.

The Wisconsin black bear is thought by many experts, including Wisconsin bear guides and hunters, to have a significant impact on the deer population through the predation of fawns in the spring. It is a fact that the carefully monitored Wisconsin elk herd at Clam Lake has not been able to increase numbers as hoped in large part due to the predation of calves by black bears. Wolves also prey on adult and young elk.

Bear population numbers just a few years ago thought to be approximately 13,000 are now believed to be much higher. The results according to the DNR of a recent two-year mark-recapture study conducted by UW-Researchers with significant help from the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association estimates the bear population to be between 26,000 and 40,000 animals.

Last year, 7,310 harvest permits were issued with hunters tagging 3,900 bears. Although the harvest was the highest in history, the statewide success rate of 53 percent in Wisconsin four hunting zones fell below the three year average of 59 percent. According to the DNR, many

hunters said bait stations went cold prior to the season, and attribute that to abundant mast crops pulling bears to natural food.

The questions still begs to be asked; if the bear population is as high as 40,000 animals and they are significant predators of fawns, is harvesting approximately 10 to 20 percent of the bear population annually enough? Or, should additional bear harvest permits be issued?

In 2010, hunters over bait in September will have first crack, and hunters with dogs begin their season later. Hunters could legally begin baiting April 15. Season in Zones A, B and D where hunting with dogs is allowed run from September 8-14 with aid of bait and with other methods not utilizing dogs; September 15- October 5 with aid of bait, dogs and other methods, and October 6-12 with aid of dogs only. Season in Zone C where dogs are prohibited runs September 8 through October 12 with aid of bait and other methods not utilizing dogs.

Another predator with certain impact on the deer herd is the wolf, which is federally protected in Wisconsin. Although exact numbers of the wolf in the state and specific numbers of deer killed per wolf annually has been debated, it's safe to say that most deer hunters will agree that there are too many wolves taking too many deer.

The DNR has submitted a petition, applauded by Wisconsin hunting groups, to remove the gray wolf from the endangered list. Wisconsin's petition joins similar action filed by Minnesota in March. It is anticipated that Michigan will also follow suit.

“The Gray Wolf has been fully recovered in the state of Wisconsin with the current minimum population of wolves estimated to be near 720 animals,” said Jack Nissen, President of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, which represents 168 hunting, fishing, trapping and forestry organizations in the state. “This number far exceeds the 100 wolf population goal set by the federal government as the threshold for delisting the wolf as an endangered species in the state of Wisconsin.”

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