

The Northern Hunt

Where are the deer?

By Dick Ellis



The deer season is a tradition that has meant camaraderie for Wisconsin families and friends and revenue for Wisconsin business. The author believes drastically declining deer in the north threatens that heritage. (Dick Ellis)

Why is the state still offering antlerless only hunts in northern Wisconsin, and selling antlerless only harvest permits? Based on extensive field time and observation from my hunting partners, many other experienced hunters, and me, we continue to target a herd that over very large areas of the north barely exists. Despite working

closely with and having great respect for countless DNR wildlife and fisheries experts over 20 years of writing, in my opinion this is poor deer management. In my opinion, to start the recovery process this antlerless herd needs to be left alone. The deer, especially the fawns, are already falling in great numbers to other predators besides man.

At the turn of the last decade, from about 1999 through 2006, our hunting camp began to reap the rewards of learning how to hunt the north woods in Unit 34 near Boulder Junction. We had hunted southern Wisconsin as young men. We don't bait. In fact, any hunter that makes the comment that baiting is imperative to filling a tag in the north woods is wrong. We needed to figure out the puzzle that is the big woods, and learn from our mistakes...our ample mistakes. Natural funnels, pockets of dense wood adjacent to long tamarack swamps, isolated oak stands during a good mast crop, and patience became some of the keys to success.

Our routine is to leave the cabin in the black of night to scatter over Vilas County to proven stands, or explore some more. We carry portable treestands on our backs and usually know if we can expect gun deer activity from our vigils during the archery season. We are sighted-in. Recovery of the animal is the first priority, regardless of size.

During those hey-day years, does came and went and were occasionally tagged. My partners scored often enough with very nice bucks on these vast public tracts. A 50 percent individual success rate and a 50 percent cabin success rate was an acceptable mark. I personally hunt the clutter with the rifle and bow probably more suited for an archer. Two big nines and an eight have fallen in that clutter; first-light kills of less than 40 years in the jungle. As often, I went home with no tag filled. That too, was fine.

We'll repeat the ritual in 2009 and take our

stands. But something is very different in our north woods over the last several years. Instead of optimism that we can expect visitors, it's likely that the number of deer I see all week will be counted on three fingers. Nothing has hung from the meat pole in 2007 or 2008. One partner hunted with a bow and gun four day weekends from September through November last year and saw two deer. I saw three deer during gun season hunting seven hours each of nine days from portable climbers. I could not pull the trigger on the spike buck at 20 yards. Two does also passed.

Even the "pets", those local deer from a herd of maybe a dozen deemed off limits by the hunters of this cabin, have faded to nothing. We saw just one fawn in the spring of 2009 over a stretch of miles. She hasn't been seen in four weeks. Old timers we know from the Manitowish Waters area are hanging up their rifles. Not because they can't hunt. But because you can't hunt what is not here.

Wolf tracks are prevalent now, even in the cabin areas. Wolf kills are without question a significant factor in deer mortality. Bear sightings are much more frequent. Deer on the hoof are cause for a long look of appreciation. And still in 2009, there is a statewide four-day antlerless only season slated behind the regular gun season, as if deer



Wolf predation of deer is having a significant impact on deer mortality in northern Wisconsin. (Dick Ellis)



A growing belief is that bear predation of fawns in northern Wisconsin in the spring, much like the significant impact of bears on the Clam Lake elk calves, is playing a large role in overall deer mortality in the northern Deer Management Units. (Greg Johnson)

within range of archers and gun hunters. Although he plants food plots, hunts private and public land and uses motion cameras to monitor the deer, things I do not do, there is an eerily similar decline in the deer populations in his forest and mine.

In 2006, his six

numbers in the north and the south do not merit separate consideration.

My very good friend, Deer & Bear Guide Mike Foss of Northern Wisconsin Outfitters is a 90 minute drive northwest of here near Washburn in Bayfield County. He is a tenacious guide, doing what he has to do to bring bears to bait and deer

hunters passed up 14 bucks on opening day. Anecdotally, on the Pub & Grub buck board last year near Washburn, 205 hunters registered 15 deer. Deer numbers have drastically declined and today, despite traveling miles of back country on his ATV, he is hard pressed to cut a track.

"We're seeing less deer this year

than last and last year was a very bad year," Foss said. "I have cameras out for weeks at a time on six food plots and travel miles and miles. I've seen one fawn. . There are very deer tracks. I've cancelled hunts. The quality is just not up here to justify guiding for deer. There might be pockets of deer populations like up in the farm country near Mason but they speak of declining deer numbers too and increasing predation in the last several years. And the deer are not here in the big woods."

Foss believes there are more bears than whitetail deer over much of Bayfield County, and that bear predation has had a significant effect on fawn mortality, similar to annual elk calf losses at Clam Lake. He stressed that both wolves and bear are efficient predators. And he said he completely trusts reports from two associates who watched and heard bears take panicked fawns.

"Bears know when the fawns are dropping," Foss said. "Wolf predation and hunter predation of course also play a major role in mortality, and the collective impact on the deer population does not justify the number of special hunts and antlerless tags slated for much of the north."

Foss calls it an imbalance.

Wolves continually expand and form new packs with little fear of man. Hunters are told they must reduce the herd and have obediently followed orders.

"These bear numbers are fantastic for a bear guide, but I also love deer hunting," he said. "I work in the Twin Cities and there are more dead deer now on the highways of Minnesota than in Wisconsin. This is really, really hurting our tourism and hunting. There will be less and less people coming to the north woods. That tradition...that camaraderie that everyone looked forward to like nothing else once a year, well they're going to go somewhere else to find it."

"DNR is hurting more and more for money. Youth hunts, lowering the age limit to hunt and the antlerless hunts have all been part of it. They should just take away the doe tags for awhile to help the deer recover. Because the deer are not here. It's not a food problem. It's a predation problem. And we're part of the predation chain."

"Something drastic went on in the last few years. It's scary. I guarantee you that the fawns are not surviving." *OWO*



Better days. Guide Mike Foss with a beautiful buck taken in Bayfield County several years ago. In 2006, Foss hunters passed up 14 bucks on opening day. In 2009, he has seen one fawn and is hard pressed to cut a track.



Better days. Ellis partner Rich Waters with a nice Unit 34 buck taken several years ago near Boulder Junction. Six hunters have not registered a deer the last two seasons. (Dick Ellis)



Better days. Dick Ellis with a good 2000 buck taken in Unit 34. The Ellis Camp near Boulder Junction has not registered a deer in 2007 or 2008. Ellis believes predation and too many antlerless only hunts are combining to make the northern herd in many areas near non-existent.