

Lethal Deer Damage Abatement Techniques – Regulated Hunting

Regulated hunting is the most effective and economical method of controlling deer populations in many locales. Over 60 years of experience and research confirm the effectiveness of deer hunting as a means of deer population control. In most situations, private landowners have the ability to regulate the deer harvest in order to reduce the level of deer damage on their land to tolerable levels. The most successful deer management occurs when landowners play an active role. Private landowners must strive with hunters to harvest appropriate numbers of deer to meet deer management goals. The key element is to have hunters taking adequate numbers to control the deer herd growth.

Deer populations are best managed when landowners utilize all of Delaware's hunting seasons. Deer seasons and bag limits are established for hunters using bows, shotguns, handguns, or muzzleloading firearms. Delaware's bow deer season opens on September 1st and closes on January 31st. Shotgun seasons are scattered throughout this 5 month period and occur off and on from October through January. While muzzleloader deer seasons occur in October and January. By understanding these different seasons and hunting devices, a landowner can best address deer management goals. The annual Division of Fish & Wildlife publication "Delaware Hunting & Trapping Guide" describes the current deer hunting seasons and bag limits. This publication is available anywhere hunting licenses are sold, on the DFW's website, or by contacting the DFW directly.

Tips for Landowners to Maximize Hunting Efficiency

Which hunting seasons should be used? All available hunting seasons should be used to maximize deer population management.

Bow Season: Archery deer hunting is a silent and discreet method of taking deer. Since bow hunters prefer to hunt out of elevated portable tree stands, arrows travel short distances before striking the ground. Open lands surrounded by development may be hunted tactfully by archers.

Firearm Season: Deer hunting with modern firearms is the most popular deer hunting method. The use of shotguns or handguns is closely regulated on a county by county basis. Many hunters schedule their vacation around these seasons. Over 65% of all the deer harvested in Delaware are taken with firearms.

Muzzleloader Season: Muzzleloader deer hunting continues to grow in popularity in Delaware. Muzzleloaders have an effective range similar to a shotgun. Muzzleloaders are fired once and must be reloaded. Improvements in muzzleloader technology have increased the effectiveness of this one shot firearm.

How can landowners find potential hunters? Talk to hunters that are in your service club, your place of worship, your workplace or your hobby club. They may need a place

to hunt or know of hunters that are looking for deer hunting property. Place a classified advertisement in a local newspaper which indicates that your farm or property is available for a deer hunting opportunities. Local sporting goods stores usually have areas where notices can be posted as well. Hunters also advertise their desire to lease properties at these locations. Income from creating a hunting lease can help to offset the monetary losses from deer damage.

Should landowners screen potential hunters on their property? In order to attract ethical, safe and effective hunters, landowners may encourage hunters to have a certain level of experience and training. Suggest that hunters be graduates of Delaware's Master Hunter Education Course. Hunters that live close to the property may be able to hunt frequently, thus be more successful. Possibly, select hunters with a number of years of deer hunting experience.

How many hunters should be on property? Have at least one hunter for each 25 acres of woodland open to hunting. It is possible to have a greater hunter density depending on the topography and surrounding property. During bow season, the density could be one bow hunter per 15 acres of woodland. Hunters should be distributed evenly across the property to maximize deer harvest. The most common error is to not have enough hunters distributed across the property.

How can hunter cooperation and safety be stressed? Meet with individual hunters or the hunting club prior to each season. Maps can be distributed at the meeting to indicate hunting areas, hazards and safety zones. Any rules can be discussed at this meeting. Hunting areas can be assigned which will ensure an even distribution of hunters and increase safety. Requiring the use of portable tree stands can increase safety. Shots taken from elevated tree stands create a quick downward flight of bullets or arrows. In future years, written information concerning any land use changes may be supplied to a hunting club spokesman which reduces the need for an annual meeting. Chronic violators of property rules should be excused from the land.

How can the property owner encourage effective deer harvest? Open as much of your property to hunting as you feel comfortable with. Deer hunting on 400 acres of a 500 acre farm will more effectively manage deer than hunting only 100 acres of this farm. Hunter density (at least one hunter per 25 acres of woods) and hunter distribution across the property should be emphasized. Remember that the key element to controlling deer numbers is to harvest adequate numbers of does. Hunters may be limited to taking no more than one antlered buck during the season. Hunters may be required to take an antlerless deer before harvesting an antlered buck during each season.

There are many different ways for landowners to encourage adequate doe deer harvest. Some landowners make the hunting lease renewal dependent on a certain level of doe harvest. Other landowners have been successful by increasing the overall lease cost and then allowing the club to reduce it to an approved minimum level by harvesting a set number of does. The options are only limited by safety, the imagination of the landowner and hunting club and the deer hunting regulations.

How can a landowner protect himself against potential liability related to deer hunting? Lawsuits brought by hunters against consenting landowners are extremely rare. Stature § 1501. Liability of owners or occupiers of land for injury to guests or trespassers within Title 25 – Property General Provisions, Chapter 15 – Tort Liability of Property Owners of the Delaware code states, “No person who enters onto private residential or farm premises owned or occupied by another person, either as a guest without payment or as a trespasser, shall have a cause of action against the owner or occupier of such premises for any injuries or damages sustained by such person while on the premises unless such accident was intentional on the part of the owner or occupier or was caused by the willful or wanton disregard of the rights of others”.

The following suggestions will help to further reduce the limited likelihood of any legal proceedings. Indicate on the property map any potential hazards. Hazards may include abandoned wells, old gravel pits, sink holes, cliffs or vacant buildings. If you are not sure if a feature is a hazard, place it on map to be safe. Make sure that all recreating on your property receive a copy of the map.

If you lease your property to a hunting club, require the club to acquire liability insurance coverage for hunting activities. This liability insurance will provide coverage for the landowner in the rare occurrence of a lawsuit. Contact your insurance agent for information regarding hunting liability insurance. Your hunting club may have access to liability insurance through non-profit conservation organizations.

How can the deer management program be evaluated?

Damage to crops will stabilize and then decline when adequate numbers of deer are removed from the property. If hunter pressure is relatively stable, hunter success rates will generally follow deer population trends. As deer numbers stabilize and decline, the numbers of deer taken by the hunters will stabilize and then drop. If crop damage continues to increase and/or hunters success rate climbs, additional antlerless deer need to be removed. Be patient, it may take two to three years before you notice reduced crop damage.

Well managed deer hunting will effectively manage deer numbers when conducted on an annual basis. Using the preceding standards will provide for a professional and friendly relationship between the landowner and the hunting group. Hunters appreciate the opportunity to hunt and will cooperate with reasonable rules such as the ones indicated. A balanced hunting program will reduce trespass and littering problems as well as provide for effective deer management.