

# Early Deer Hunting Opportunities

*by Greg Feeman*



*Early deer hunting opportunities will be offered to hunters in opposite corners for the state in 2009.*

CRAIG BIRLE

Last fall's early doe season in two units in the northeast was so successful that the North Dakota Game and Fish Department will provide the same opportunity to hunters in the southwest this fall.

Greg Link, Department assistant wildlife division chief, said early doe seasons – or special herd reduction seasons – are intended to reduce deer populations in targeted areas. “Overall hunter and harvest numbers in the northeast were better than expected, and we anticipate the same success in the southwest,” Link said.

During last September's seven-day season in units 2C and 2D, 23 percent of the hunters with antlerless licenses in the two units participated, taking approximately 690 does. The early season amounted to about 10 percent of the total doe harvest in the two units. “Landowners were willing to allow hunters on their land, and hunters made connections early and were courteous,” Link said.

Feedback from last fall's pilot season was overwhelmingly positive, with many indicating a relaxed hunt with little competition, which bodes well for young and elderly hunters. In addition, many hunters said deer weren't as active as in November.

This means another early season is set for this fall from September 25 through October 1 in the same two units in the northeast, and one is added in the southwest from October 2-9 in units 3E1, 3E2, 3F1, 3F2 and 4F.

Early season dates are determined by factoring in other hunting seasons, Link said, to maximize opportunities for some, while not conflicting with others. “The herd reduction season in the northeast will finish before elk and most waterfowl hunters are in the field,” Link added. “The season in the southwest coincides with the early portion of the pronghorn gun season so those hunters can pick up an additional

doe license, but will conclude before pheasant season to reduce any potential conflict with upland game hunters.”

These two areas of the state have herd reduction seasons for similar reasons. Winter surveys indicated significant increases in deer populations in the targeted units; an increase in available licenses in recent years hasn't adequately reduced the population; and landowners experiencing deer depredation welcomed the idea of an early season for white-tailed doe hunters as a means to increase harvest of females, which will help trim the population.

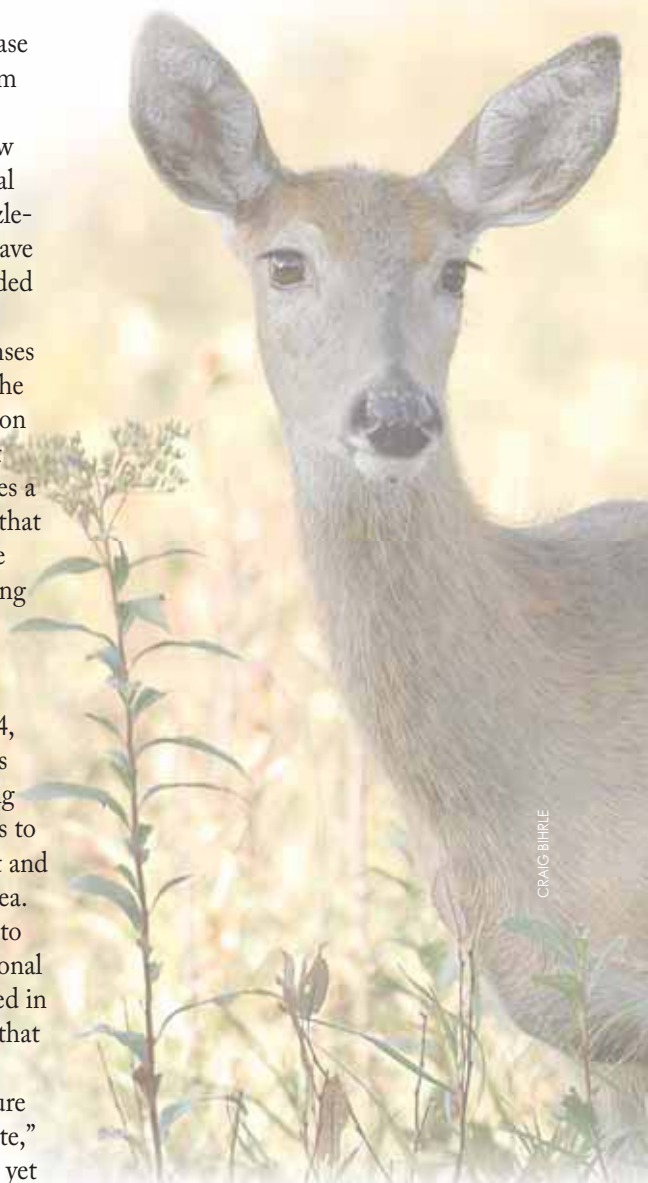
Special herd reduction seasons allow harvest of antlerless deer with any legal firearm, including centerfire and muzzle-loading rifles, or bow. Hunters must have an antlerless license from a unit included in the special herd reduction areas.

In addition, concurrent season licenses from those units are valid, as long as the deer is harvested in the unit specified on the license, special regulations for that season are followed and the hunter uses a firearm or bow that is permissible for that season. Hunters can purchase multiple concurrent licenses and use them during the special herd reduction season.

Arriving at a herd reduction season didn't happen overnight, Link said. In fact, it took a handful of years. In 2004, Game and Fish Department biologists set management goals for each hunting unit based on historical information as to what the particular unit could support and landowner tolerance for deer in the area.

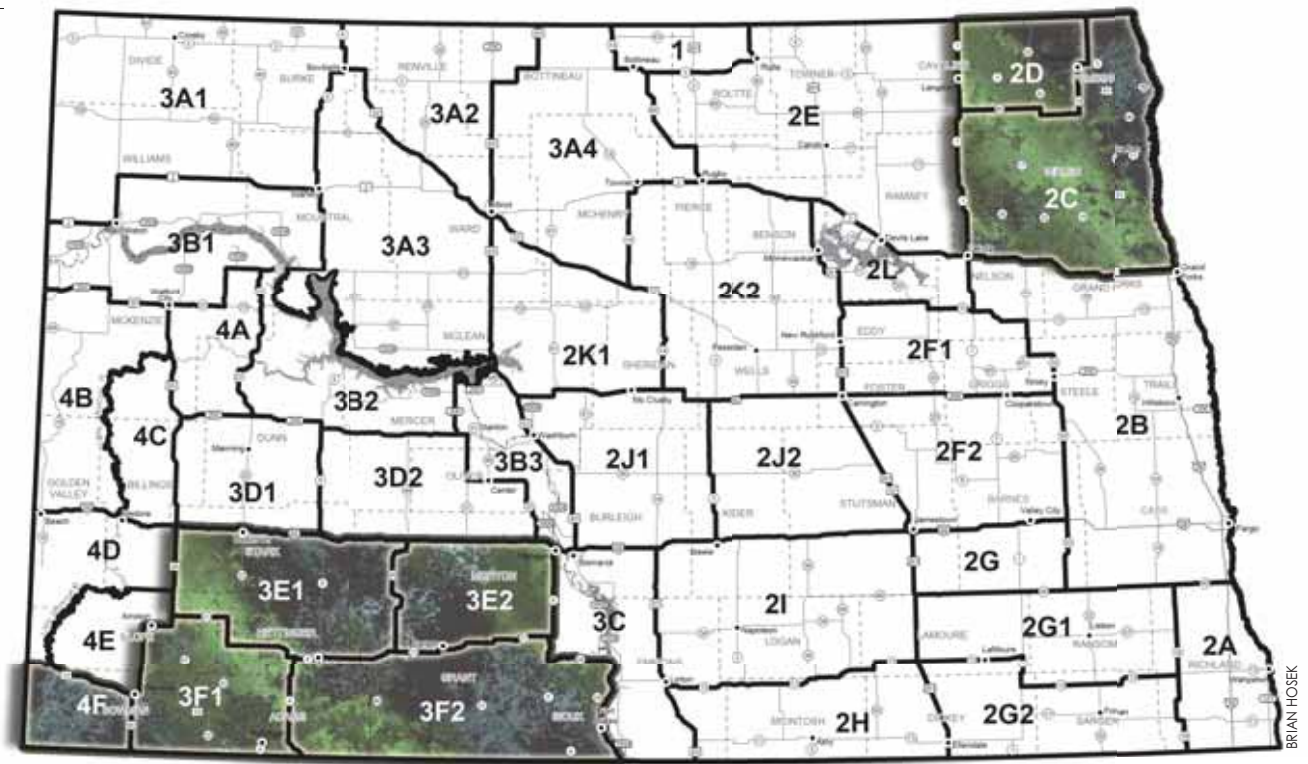
Since then, an aggressive approach to deer management that involves additional antlerless licenses has not yet succeeded in reducing deer numbers in some units that were above management goals.

“For the most part, increased pressure has been successful in much of the state,” Link said. “In other units we have not yet



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Hunters will have their pick from seven units open to early deer gun hunting opportunities.



had the harvest and reduced deer numbers we had hoped for. For this reason we considered other approaches to reducing deer numbers.”

Simply increasing the number of licenses did not result in a higher harvest over the last several years in unit 2C.

In 2006, 7,500 antlerless licenses were available to hunters in 2C, and an estimated 5,529 antlerless deer were harvested. Population indices tabulated the following spring showed stable-to-increasing deer numbers. In 2007, the number of antlerless licenses available in the unit increased to 8,000. By the end of the 2007 hunting season 395 antlerless deer licenses remained unissued, and the estimated harvest of antlerless deer declined to 4,933.

Some people thought lowering the price of an antlerless deer license would get more hunters in the field, thus increasing the harvest. However, this incentive in other states, which have tried selling antlerless licenses for as little as \$2 each, “hasn’t worked.” Hunters buy the license, but do not feel compelled to fill the license and harvest a deer,” Link said. “The price of the license is just a small fraction of the actual cost to deer hunt.”

Others were concerned with timing of the season, citing unharvested crops and warmer weather. “Much like last year, crops are also still standing in November, and with warm temperatures hunters pack ice coolers and quickly process their animal,” Link said. “Basically it is

no different than bow hunters who routinely harvest and process deer and pronghorn during this time of year.”

What about the notion of landowners not allowing early season hunters access to land for fear of chasing bucks away? “That wasn’t an issue last year at all,” Link said. “Deer were able to settle down again before the November deer gun season.

“That is actually the beauty of an early season for does,” Link continued. “Landowners can get an adequate harvest on the key sector of the population with little disruption to the quality of their traditional deer hunting in November.”

That is why landowners in herd reduction units continue to cooperate with the Department in this management effort. “If deer numbers are not maintained within tolerance levels of landowners, all hunters will suffer,” Link said.

The Game and Fish Department believes herd reduction seasons for gun hunters are the most efficient and expedient means of controlling and reducing deer numbers. With that said, Link is hopeful that deer numbers will be maintained by using traditional season structures once they are within management goals and objectives.

*GREG FREEMAN is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.*