

# Deer Gun Season, Thanksgiving and the Calendar

Every year after the regular deer gun season closes, often at fall advisory board meetings, Game and Fish staff get questions about why the gun season is, or isn't, open during Thanksgiving weekend.

In 2008 the questions were mostly from those who would prefer an open deer season during the long holiday weekend. Deer gun season in 2008 did not fall over Thanksgiving weekend, but it did in 2007, and the difference between the two years was fresh on some hunters' minds.

In years when deer gun season is open over Thanksgiving, some people don't like it, typically because a deer hunt can complicate or compromise family holiday plans.

That North Dakota's deer gun season sometimes includes Thanksgiving weekend, and sometimes doesn't, is a coincidence of the calendar.

For more than 20 years, the regular season has opened on the Friday before November 11, which means the range of opening dates is November 4-10.

Thanksgiving is celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November, which can fall anywhere from the 22<sup>nd</sup> through 28<sup>th</sup>.

Since the late 1980s, the regular deer gun season has consistently spanned 16.5 days, starting at noon on a Friday and providing three weekends for hunting.

Every five years, the deer season opens on November 9 or 10. It's during those years that 16.5 days runs out through the Thanksgiving weekend. It last occurred in 2006 and 2007, and given the current season structure,

will come around again in 2012, and then not again until 2017 and 2018.

While this season framework of starting date and number of days is not set in stone, it has worked well, and with Thanksgiving included or not, hunters and landowners generally like the consistency from year to year.

## Deer Season Evolution

Consistent deer seasons were not always the case. Since the early 1950s when Game and Fish started

holding a deer season every year, season length often varied from year to year, and from unit to unit.

For instance, in 1952, the first statewide firearms deer season ran for 2.5 or 4.5 days, depending on the unit.

(Note: It was in 1949 that the state legislature first passed a law requiring deer season to open at noon on a Friday. Game and Fish, through governor's proclamation, sets which Friday the season opens, and how long it runs. The law was repealed, then put in place again in 1963. The deer season actually opened on a Tuesday in 1962.)

Also in 1963, Game and Fish for the first time extended the deer season to 9.5 days statewide. An experimental 16.5-day season in a unit in the Turtle Mountains followed two years later, while the rest of the state stayed at 9.5 days.

For nearly 20 years, 9.5 days was the norm, except for a few years with an extra week added in the Turtle Mountains. The season opener varied somewhat, starting as late as November 17 in 1978, and November 12 in 1982.



2007 – Deer gun season includes Thanksgiving weekend.



2008 – Deer gun season does not include Thanksgiving weekend.

The move to the current 16.5-day season started in 1983 with many units in the eastern part of the state. Western units stayed at 9.5 days. Eastern units opened November 4 and western units opened November 11 so the season closed on the same date statewide.

The next year some more units came under the 16.5-day umbrella, but the whole state opened on the same date and closed on different days.

In 1985 the entire state, except for the badlands units, had a 16.5-day season. That set-up changed again in 1986 with an experiment with 23.5 days statewide, plus an additional season proclaimed for early December because not all available licenses were issued before the regular season started.

Some units had 23.5 days again in 1987. Following that season Game and Fish conducted a survey of landowners and hunters and determined that at the time, 16.5 days was a fair compromise, and since 1988 Game and Fish has set the regular deer gun season at 16.5 days, with the opener coming the Friday before November 11.

## The Next Generation

Back in January 2007, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* published an article on the status of young hunters in the state. Generally, the findings were favorable. The percentage of the state's youth who were at least trying hunting was the highest ever.

However, among the myriad statistics analyzed for that article, one of the more interesting was a notable fall-off in the number of deer license applicants from age 17 to age 18, the transition year between high school and post-secondary education or the work world.

Depending on the year, the number of 18-year-olds applying for deer licenses is about 15 percent lower than the number of 17-year-olds who applied the previous year. There is additional fall-off from age 18 to 19 as well. In contrast, there is very little fall-off, and sometimes even gains, between age 16 and 17, or 15 and 16; the changes are also more variable after age 20.

One of theories for this phenomenon is that some graduating high school seniors, during the application period in May, don't apply for a deer license because of the perception they won't have time because of school demands or inability to travel back home from long distances for a short weekend of deer hunting.

The other side of that dilemma is that most post-secondary students, at least for their first few years away, come home for Thanksgiving weekend, which begs the question: Would more students continue to try to hunt deer during their first two post-high-school years if they knew they would have a chance to hunt when they were home for Thanksgiving weekend?

A reasonable extension of that is, would more people in general, and youth specifically, opt to hunt deer if the

extra time available over what for many is a four-day weekend, was always a possibility?

Such a season set-up is not without precedent. South Dakota typically sets its west and east river deer seasons so they would include Thanksgiving weekend. In 2008, the calendar fell in such a way that with a traditional opener, the west river season was not open over Thanksgiving. South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks received a lot of negative feedback from both hunters and landowners, and decided to change the structure of both their east and west river seasons so that in the future, Thanksgiving weekend is always included.

At this point, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is not advocating a change from the traditional deer gun season. The hunter retention angle alone, however, is a legitimate concern and warrants asking for input from hunters, landowners and anyone else who has a stake.

Some considerations:

- Including Thanksgiving weekend in every deer season could be accomplished a couple of different ways.
- The current traditional opening date could be retained, and the season extended to 23.5 days every year.
- To retain an annual 16.5-day season would require a later range of opening dates, November 9-15 instead of the 4<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup>.
- Changing deer gun season ranges would also require changing the muzzleloader season ranges.
- A longer or later deer season would in some years mean more time for farmers to finish up row crop harvest, meaning less standing corn and sunflowers during part of hunting season, and perhaps more time for landowners to hunt after they had finished their fall work.
- A later opening would mean the peak of the rut would occur more toward the beginning of deer season, rather than toward the middle or end.
- Biologically, a longer season or a slightly later range of opening dates would not likely have any influence on deer management.

The list certainly goes on, and could include things like colder weather potential, school schedules, conflicts with Veteran's Day, positive or negative influences on bow season, and more. Game and Fish would like to know what you think. Is a longer, or later deer season worthy of future consideration?

*To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov); call us at (701) 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*